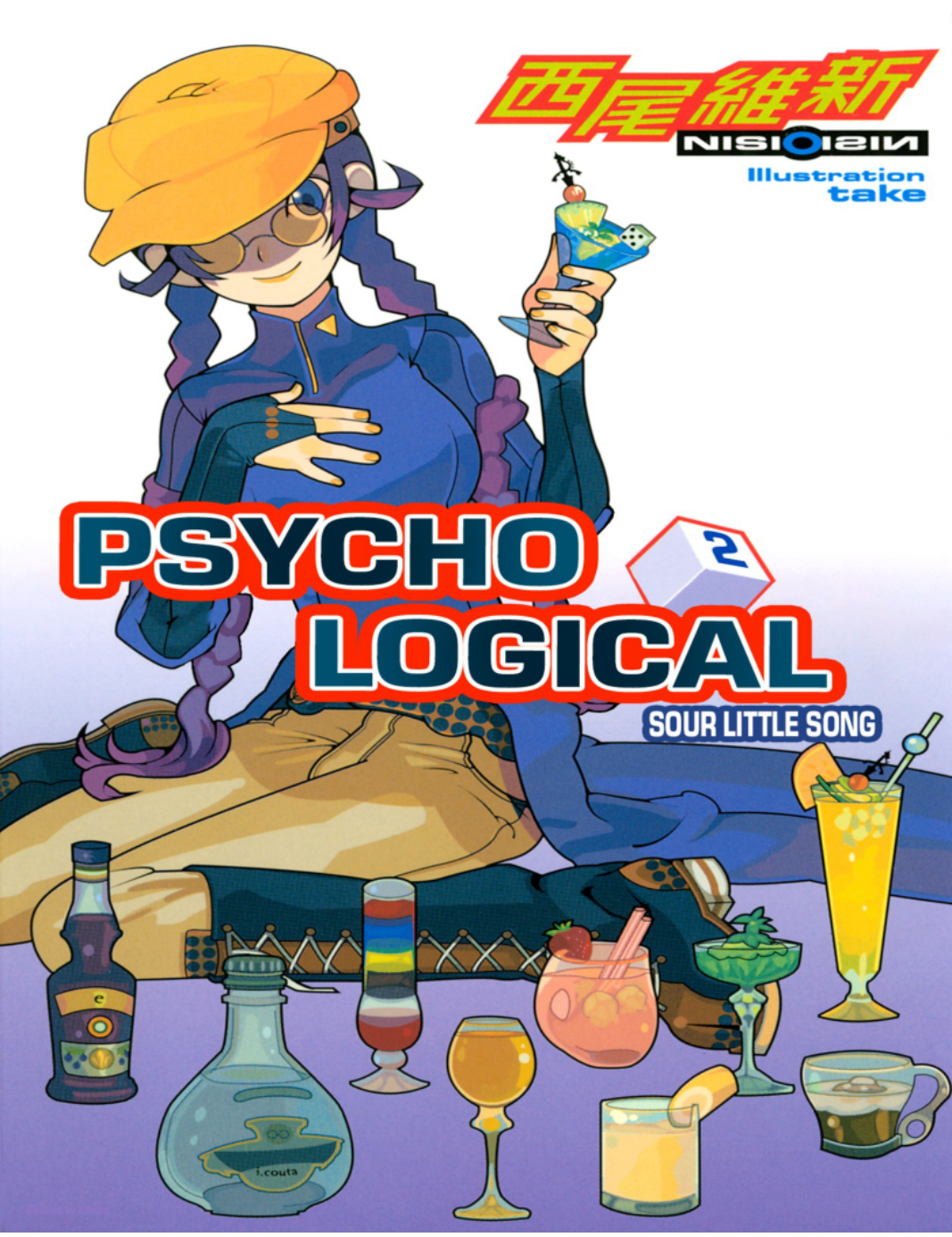
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2
LOGICAL
SOUR LITTLE SONG

# Psycho Logical (vol. 2)

Sour Little Song

NISIOISIN

*~Translation by Dutch Angle*

*With help from the original translation done by Suiminchuudoku*
*English Translation Images - Akutagawa Kakuzō*

Book Design Hiroto Kumagai
Cover Design Veia
Illustration take

# Psychological

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## Cast of Characters

Kunagisa Tomo ——— 《Dead Blue》

Suzunashi Neon ——— Chaperone

Me (Narrator) ——— Nineteen-year-old

Shadou Kyouichirou ——— 《Mad Daemon》

Ougaki Shito ——— Assistant

Uze Misachi ——— Secretary

Koutari Hinayoshi ——— Researcher

Neo Furuara ——— Researcher

Miyoshi Kokoromi ——— Researcher

Kasugai Kasuga ——— Researcher

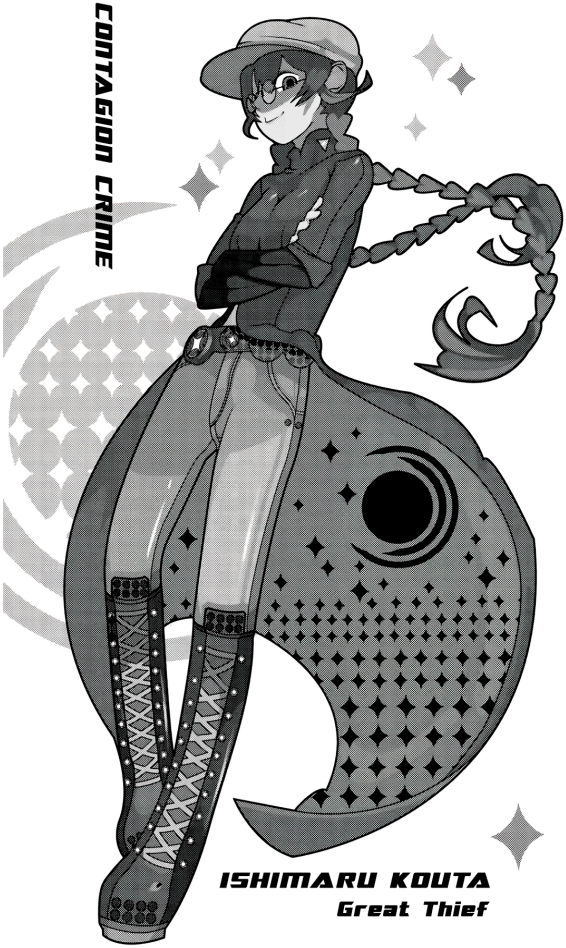
Utsurigi Gaisuke ——— 《Malignant Green》

Aikawa Jun ——— Contractor

Ishimaru Kouta ——— Great Thief

Zerozaki Itoshiki ——— Intruder

# DAY TWO (2) - CONTAGION CRIME



ISHIMARU KOUTA
Great Thief

## 0

*There are no flowers that do not wilt, yet some flowers never bloom.*
*This world is truly unfair.*

## 1

"—You good-for-nothing!"

Professor Kyouichirou hollered and beat Shito with his wooden cane, his voice nearly cracking. Shito didn't even attempt to move out of the way as one of the blows struck him in the head. The impact sent him crumpling to the floor. Even then, without letting up, Professor Kyouichirou continued pummelling Shito's curled-up body over and over. The entire time, he kept repeating, "Good-for-nothing! Good-for-nothing! **Good-for-nothing!**"

We watched it happen.

Unable to say or do anything, we watched it happen.

Shadou Kyouichirou, Koutari Hinayoshi, Neo Furuara, Miyoshi Kokoromi, Kasugai Kasuga, Uze Misachi, Ougaki Shito, Suzunashi Neon, Kunagisa Tomo, and I. The aforementioned ten people were gathered inside the Primary Research Ward's parlour. That meant, with the exception of *her*, every person at the research facility was currently accounted for.

"——……"

Over an hour had passed since the incident, but the police still hadn't arrived. Apparently Misachi filed the police report immediately after the body was discovered, but the downpour that visited us in the middle of night paired with the fact we were so deep in the mountains spelt disaster for our current situation. It's not like the roads had washed away, but it meant it would still take a little while longer before anyone got here.

A murder.

I suppose that's what you'd call it.

It didn't feel real, but there were no other words for it. Only yesterday, Utsurigi Gaisuke had spoken so knowingly, and now he was dead. None of it felt real, but I suppose there's no denying what happened.

“Damnit… and it was my turn to question him today too…”

I mumbled, the image of Shito’s beating still reflected in my eyes. If everything had played out how it was supposed to, what questions would I have even had for that man? I felt like there was something I was meant to ask, but at the same time I felt like there was nothing. In the end, Utsurigi Gaisuke managed to quit while he was ahead. Whether that was something he’d wanted is a different matter altogether.

“—Please, that’s enough already.”

Misachi clung to the professor’s arm.

“Professor, please calm dow—”

“Silence!”

Professor Kyouichirou tore his arm free, and then, just like he had done to Shito, he brought his cane down on her. Misachi raised her arms to protect her face, but when the blow connected, she let out a tiny yelp and collapsed to the floor.

“You’re nothing but nuisances, **each and every one of you**—”

He said, burying his foot squarely in Misachi’s back.

“——……”

So easily they crumble.

These things called people.

Seeing this small, old man throw such a tantrum- whatever sense of gravity he once held, whatever air of experience, was long gone. Not a trace of the man I met yesterday remained. In his place was something more akin to a toddler, a child whose favourite toy had been broken and was taking it out on everyone around him. A man of such calibre had been reduced to this so easily. For better or for worse, even Shadou Kyouichirou, who had overwhelmed me with his staggering presence, was no better than this.

That’s why, if someone like me were in his shoes-

“—How unsightly, Professor Shadou.”

As Professor Kyouichirou reeled back to beat Misachi once more, a voice as sharp as an arrow reverberated throughout the room. And so, with his cane still raised high above his head, Professor Kyouichirou froze.

The voice belonged to Suzunashi.

Sitting in a chair with her legs crossed, her chin raised as if looking

down on the professor, Suzunashi wore an expression of genuine contempt.

"Goodness— I expected more from someone with as grand a title as *The Mad Daemon*, but I'm beyond disappointed. Imagine my shock when you turned out to be nothing more than another boring brute. How dull. To think, a man who's lived for sixty years would fall apart over the death of one man, take it out on women and children, and go completely off the rails without once confirming the situation for himself. Honestly, I can't bare to look at you —"

"Be quiet! A woman who hasn't even lived thirty years has no right to talk back to me! You know nothing!"

The professor shouted and threw his cane at her. Suzunashi didn't bother dodging; she didn't even blink. The head of the cane shattered against her brow. Even then, Suzunashi just huffed and continued to stare at him with disdain.

That glare, it was as if she were genuinely gazing upon a lowly beast. As someone who's been on the receiving end of that glare, I was more than able to guess how it made the professor feel. It was a glare that made you feel every bit as small and detestable as you really were.

"You wretch… who do you think you're looking at—?"

"Professor! Please stop!" Shito called out from the floor where he still lay. "Calm down— please collect yourself!"

"Collect myself!? How could anyone collect themselves at a time like this!? If **It**'s dead-" Professor Kyouichirou turned back to Shito. "If **It**'s dead, if **It's all gone**, what am I to do!? It's all over! **Everything** I've built 'till now is ruined!"

《**It**》 —— Utsurigi Gaisuke.

"…Who did it?" Professor Kyouichirou cast his gaze towards the table where we were all sat, his eyes brimming with hatred. "Who killed It? Who's the one responsible? Who pulled this stunt, and for what purpose!? It was one of you, wasn't it!? Have you no shame, you scoundrel!?"

He shouted and slammed both fists on the table. But there was no response. It wasn't because everyone was too frightened to speak, it was simply that no one had the words with which to answer.

Suzunashi had already averted her gaze as if to say, *'you're not even worth looking at.'* Her forehead seemed to be bleeding a little, presumably from the cane. However, Suzunashi paid it no mind. She seemed to be thinking about something else, but perhaps she was thinking about nothing at all.

Beside her was Kunagisa, who had simply watched the scene play out in silence.

"——……what a load of nonsense."

Here's how it began— if this even counts as the beginning— Regardless, I'm told that Shito was the first to notice anything was out of the ordinary. This morning, like any other morning, he was scheduled to receive a phone call from Utsurigi, but apparently it never came. If that was all it was, then it'd happened plenty of times already— perhaps he'd overslept or forgotten, or maybe he was doing it just to cause trouble. All of which seemed in character for Utsurigi— and so, thinking nothing of it, Shito tried to contact him from his end, but there was no response.

Shito sensed something was off, so he reported the situation to the professor and Misachi. When the order to '*go and check on him*' was passed down by the professor, Shito did as he was told. This was around half past six.

That's when Shito discovered **it**. Drenched in blood, with every inch of his body cut up and mutilated, was Utsurigi Gaisuke. The aforementioned *scoundrel's* work of murderous art, on full display.

That means, the first to discover Utsurigi Gaisuke's corpse was Ougaki Shito.

"…scoundrel, huh…?"

I'm not sure what made the professor settle on a word like that, but he had hit the nail on the head. Our seclusion in the heart of the mountains acted as a kind of enclosed environment. So, for example, if someone were to get murdered, the culprit would undoubtedly be found among those who remained. That's all there was to it.

That's the kind of terribly hackneyed situation we found ourselves in.

"—Oh my, let's keep a level head, everyone."

Just as a sense of hopelessness began to wash over us— no, just as that sense of hopelessness started to grow stale, Neo cut in. He spread his arms wide, as if he'd just told the punchline to a joke, before settling into a relaxed pose.

"There's nothing to gain from losing our cool. Isn't that right, professor? First thing's first, we need to decide what we're going to do next."

"**Next**?" The professor shot a dejected look in Neo's direction. "What could you possibly suggest? There is no **next**. Not anymore."

"Now, now, you shouldn't be so quick to throw in the towel. Let's

see, let's start by making sure the one who pulled this stunt is held responsible. Come, look at how excessive it all was, there's no way they didn't leave some kind of evidence behind. When the police get here, they'll catch our culprit right away. From there, we'll—"

"Our culprit? It's one of you, is it not?"

"That's awfully short-sighted, professor. That's not like the great Professor Kyouichirou at all. Think about it, didn't we just have an intruder alert the other day? We shouldn't discount the idea that this was the work of someone from outside. No, I'm certain it was. No matter how impregnable a castle you claim this place to be, it's not like it's actually impossible for an intruder to get inside."

—Intruder.

I stiffened at the mention of the word, but not enough that anyone would notice.

"We shouldn't just assume it was an inside job. I won't say it's impossible, but that kind of thinking isn't good. For most of us—the researchers, that is– we'd have no motive for doing something like this, would we? After all, **It** was our precious, precious **research subject**."

"Neo!"

The professor yelled in a tone I'd never heard him use before. But even then, "it's fine, isn't it? Not like it matters anymore," Neo answered, completely nonplussed.

"I'm sure Lady Kunagisa and that sensible young woman have it all figured out already; the lad's probably got a pretty good idea as well. Why else would they come all the way here? Am I wrong? So why not give it a rest? Let's put an end to all the deception and trickery. Now's not the time to start pointing fingers without good reason, is it?"

"……" "……"

After he'd finished talking, Neo glanced at the professor and Kunagisa in turn. The professor wore a sour expression but didn't say anything further. As for Kunagisa, she just ignored him as if she wasn't even listening. "Good grief." Neo shrugged his shoulders. "Alright fine, moving on. What I'm saying is, none of the faculty would have had reason to kill Utsurigi. That much should be obvious. So where does that leave us? Are we to suspect the professor's secretary, Miss Uze Misachi? Or what about his assistant, the young Ougaki Shito?"

The two of them, still collapsed at the professor's feet, both looked up at the same time.

“But that’s no good either. Everyone knows the two of them are completely devoted to the professor. Pardon my bluntness, but Ougaki’s loyalty is particularly unusual. So long as it’d upset the professor, there’s no way the two of them could have done it. So what then? That’s right, we’d have no choice but to suspect our *guests*, Lady Kunagisa and company, but —”

Neo shifted his gaze to us.

“–once again, no dice. After all, the three of them came here to ‘*rescue’* Utsurigi, and while there are some of us who may find that choice of words vexing, they surely didn’t intend to murder him. Isn’t that right?” Neo turned to face the professor once more. “And with that, professor, we’ve run out of suspects. Of course, that includes you.”

“……”

It’d be hard to call his logic sound, but Neo’s reasoning had certainly shut the professor up. No matter how incensed he was, no matter how erratic, downtrodden, rotten, or exhausted, this was the kind of man Shadou Kyouichirou was, the kind who couldn’t turn a blind eye to reason.

“That’s why I can’t picture it being anyone besides an outsider. Given the performative nature of it, maybe it was the work of one of your competitors, professor. If I were you, I’d be a little suspicious of those folks at the Hariuro Foundation or the Baisar Group.”

“…They’d never make such a spectacle of it.”

“Perhaps. Still, it’s a possibility. That’s why it’s a little early to conclude that the scoundrel is one of us. Right? Thoughts, everyone?”

Neo looked back at us, as if expecting us to weigh in.

“……”

He was right. While his tone was somewhat irreverent, that might’ve just been his way of breaking through this heavy atmosphere. At the very least, he had succeeded at getting everyone — especially the professor— to think about the situation with as much composure as they could muster.

Naturally, that went for me too.

“—Miss Kokoromi,”

She’d positioned herself as far away from us as possible, so I had to call out to her. With a “hm?” her eyes widened, then a thin, mysterious smile formed on her face. “What’s this?” She turned my way.

“…Ya got something to ask me, kiddo?”

"……Miss, wouldn't you be able to figure something out just by taking a look at it?" I asked anxiously. "After all, you're an expert on human anatomy. Maybe you could tell us how he was killed, or the cause of death, or something—"

"Heh-heh, never thought there'd come a time when you'd turn to little-old-me. Life's a drag, but I reckon it's little moments like this that make it all worthwhile." Miss Kokoromi flashed me a horrid smile, one I'd seen many times during my time abroad. "Well, I've only had a peek, so I can't say much."

"——……"

"Given the amount of bleeding, it was blood loss. Either that or trauma-induced shock. But anyone with eyes coulda toldya that much." Her words weren't addressed to me specifically; she was speaking to the whole room. "As for time of death, lessee, it woulda been last night, anytime between midnight and three in the morning."

"That's a pretty broad window."

"I s'ppose. Normally, if you're fixin' to pin time of death **at a glance**, ya go off of rigour mortis and the condition of the eyes, but I ain't had a chance to fiddle with the body yet, and the eyes ain't in the best condition."

Both of Utsurigi's eyes had been gouged out by a pair of scissors.

"Hate to letcha down, but that's 'bout all I can say for now."

"…Thanks."

I bowed my head and turned away.

Between midnight and three in the morning… what had I been doing during that time? I remember meeting Kasugai at around one a.m., and then, after that—

"My-my, trying to establish an alibi, are we, lad?" Neo said. "If so, there's a better way to go about it. Isn't that right, Uze?"

Having suddenly heard her name, Misachi jolted to attention, "Sorry? —What might that be?"

"The door entry logs. Why don't you go take a look?"

"……"

Misachi glanced over at the professor. "Hurry up and go," having lost his patience, the professor snapped at her.

"……Understood."

Misachi nodded and swiftly shuffled her way out of the room.

The logs…? Neo's choice of words made me tilt my head. What did he mean? Unless… Did that mean that every time we had entered one of the research wards, the ironclad security system (opened only by keycard, password, voice recognition, and retinal scan—) had kept records of it on some kind of central computer? I see, in that case, we'd be able to definitively narrow down the time the incident took place. After all, to enter the Seventh Ward, you'd have to—

"…you'd have to—"

My thoughts froze.

That's right. This wasn't an issue of whether or not the incident had been recorded or anything like that. In order to enter the seventh ward, you'd have to **break through** the *ironclad security system*. Not only would anyone without a key assigned to them have been unable to kill Utsurigi, they wouldn't have even been able to get inside.

But in that case— I looked at Neo. Had he just not noticed? If he had, then he'd have realized there wasn't an **outsider** alive who could've set foot in the Seventh Ward.

Take the Red Contractor, Aikawa Jun, for example. She was second to none when it came to the art of vocal mimicry and mind-reading, not to mention lock picking; in fact, the gulf in skill was so extreme that, as of yet, none had managed to come second to her (at least, according to the woman herself). And while you might be better off taking the words of someone narcissistic enough to call themselves something as self-aggrandizing as *Humanity's Strongest* with a grain of salt, even someone like her would likely find the task of opening these insulated doors impossible. After all, her opponent would've been the locking mechanism. A device designed to follow a strict set of logic.

Neo just sat there as composed as could be, his large body sinking into his chair. Of course he'd noticed. There's no way he hadn't spotted the inconsistency in his own argument. Then was this just a means of placating the professor?

——He was one clever bastard.

I had just been reminded of that fact. With that in mind, I relaxed once more.

In other words, that meant it was impossible for the three of us— Kunagisa, Suzunashi, and I— to have committed the crime. Without faculty clearance, there'd have been no way for us to make it past the door; that was

the obvious conclusion.

"——……"

By that same logic, I could attest to **her** innocence as well. That left seven— we could narrow the suspects down to the seven researchers who had been here from the start. They were the only ones capable of infiltrating the research ward, that much was certain. If there were any holes in my logic, they weren't the kind large enough to worry about.

I glanced around casually. Seven people— Professor Kyouichirou, Neo, Koutari, Kasugai, Miss Kokoromi, and Shito— as well as Misachi, who had already left the room. Seven people. Still, not everything Neo said early had been a means to quell the professor. Among these seven people, I couldn't think of a single one who'd have cause to murder Utsurigi— especially in such a violent fashion. But just because I couldn't think of one didn't mean-

"Still, I suppose we should cover our bases," Neo said. "Last night, I was in my own research ward— the Fifth Ward, the entire time. How about you, Koutari?"

"Me too," Koutari replied curtly. "No point in walking around in the middle of the night."

"That goes for me as well."

"I stepped outside briefly to walk the dogs. I bumped into that boy on the way. Isn't that right?"

Kasugai asked. I nodded wordlessly.

"And the professor? What about you?"

"Same here," seemingly irritated by Neo's question, the professor gave a brusque answer. "I was in the Primary Ward with Shito and Uze the entire time. You'd know as much if you read the logs."

"Is that so? And? How about you?" Neo turned his attention to us. "What were you all up to last night?"

"We were in the lodge the entire time. I did go for a short walk right before it started raining, though."

"Hmm, a walk, huh?" Neo nodded pointedly. "I see, going for a late-night stroll is only human, I suppose. In that case, that means the culprit isn't one of us after all, right? No one even went near the Seventh ward." Neo said, likely not believing a single word he was saying. I had gone for a late-night stroll, gotten involved in secret affairs, and then lied about it. As Neo said, I

was only human. After all, no one's completely honest at all times.

"…Hey, Inoji," Suzunashi whispered so that only I could hear, "it looks like we might be in a spot of trouble."

"—? You think?" I peered at Kunagisa out of the corner of my eye (her expression was as blank as ever), as I stifled my voice in reply to Suzunashi. "Not to borrow the professor's catchphrase or anything, but it's all over… With Utsurigi dead, there was no point in even coming here. We went through all this for nothing."

No, that's probably not what Suzunashi was talking about. She was most likely referring to our ensuing trouble with the police. They would probably perform a thorough investigation, and it was possible that, as potential suspects in the case, we wouldn't be allowed to leave Aichi until it was all over. We might be back in Kyoto a little later than expected. I wasn't so much worried about an uninvolved university student like myself or an unemployed shut-in like Kunagisa, but Suzunashi had a job to get back to (even if she was only a part-timer). I wondered if that's what she meant by *trouble*, but Suzunashi said, "That's not it. It feels like we're in the eye of the storm… Honestly, nothing good ever comes from listening to Asano's requests… and I mean never… But if I know that, then why do I always…"

"Um, Suzunashi?"

It seemed like Suzunashi was wallowing in self-loathing. As I gazed in bewilderment, unsuccessfully trying to understand what she was getting at, Misachi returned. She wore a slightly troubled expression. First, she turned to face us, and then, apprehensively, she walked straight to the professor's side. She whispered something in his ear.

"……What?" the professor blurted out. "And you're certain about this?"

"Yes… without question."

She attested. What exactly she attested to was beyond me, but she nodded all the same. "Hmph." The professor appeared lost in thought. And like that, he made his way over to the table and took a seat. Leaning on his elbows, he sunk even further into contemplation.

"……"

……What could Misachi have possibly said?

No, the actual words she chose were of little importance. What concerned me was that, upon hearing those words, the professor regained his composure— or rather, the unfathomable presence the professor had when I first met him once again inhabited his small frame. I had yet to realize what it

was that I found so unnerving about that fact, but it unnerved me nonetheless.

In other words, I had a bad feeling about it. And just like the bad feeling I had about my reunion with Miss Kokoromi, it twisted my stomach in knots. What's more, my premonitions had never once been wrong. Just like that contemptible soothsayer, they had never once been wrong.

"——Hmph."

The professor gave a slight nod then raised his head. Naturally, all eyes were on him.

"Ladies and Gentleman, it appears there's been some complications."

Complications? Hearing that word, I glanced at Suzunashi. Her eyes were closed, almost as if she were sleeping. The bleeding from her forehead had already stopped and dried up. I turned my gaze back to the professor. That crafty, experienced grin of his had worked its way back onto his face.

"—Oi, Uze," the professor turned to her, "—I want you to contact the security at the gate. When the police arrive, have them turn them away."

"Huh…?" Misachi was shocked. "But, why…?"

"Never mind the reason. Let's see, tell them it was a simple miscommunication," The professor set his sights on Shito, "…or perhaps a child's tasteless prank."

"…I see," Misachi nodded uncertainly. She didn't seem to have a firm grasp on the situation— no, her expression was that of someone who had no grasp on it at all. "…a miscommunication…?"

"What's the matter? Off with you."

"……but why……?"

"Do you need me to explain every goddamned thing to you before you do your job?"

"No, that's not what I-… Please excuse me, I'll leave right away."

Misachi hurriedly bowed her head to the professor before scampering out of the room for the second time.

"…What's the meaning of this, professor?" Neo said, his eyes, still fixed on the door Misachi had just closed behind her. "Turning the police away? Are you in your right mind? What did Uze say?"

"That's just it, Neo. That's the issue," Professor Kyouichirou sneered. "We've found ourselves in quite the predicament."

"…Of course we have.  But what does that have to do with anything? Does turning the police away somehow help us solve the case?"

"Just listen,"

The professor gently brushed aside Neo's complaints. Then after a moment's pause, he continued. "Let's start from the beginning, Neo. There's something wrong with everything you've been saying. The entrance to Utsurigi's Seventh Ward was sealed by an airtight security system. No matter who the outsider was, they wouldn't have been able to get past it. That's certainly the case for the likes of Hariuro and Baisar, **at least**,"

The professor punctuated '*at least'* with a sharp staccato. That action was, once again, accompanied by an unexplainable pressure. What on Earth was this old man trying to say?

After having it pointed out to him by the professor, "Ahh, now that you mention it, you might be on to something. I hadn't noticed," Neo said unconvincingly. "But still, we shouldn't be too hasty in assuming it was an inside job. Professor, we've been working on this together since the beginning. I understand that you're out of sorts after what happened to Utsurigi, but we're all in the same boat. We shouldn't immediately start assigning blame…"

"Out of sorts? Mind your manners. I'm nothing of the sort. I'm as calm as could be."

As if the professor's fury had been nothing more than a collective hallucination, he spoke in a stately fashion.

"Be that as it may, professor…"

"At ease, Neo. You're not suggesting I'd suspect one of my own without good cause, are you? What Uze told me a moment ago, don't you want to hear it?"

While each of us might have had something to say about his first statement, the second piqued our interest. We all hung on his every word. The professor puffed out his chest a little and said,

"…Last night, there is no record of the *Seventh Ward* ever being opened."

"……No record?" Neo repeated. "So what you're saying is, we have no evidence anyone even entered the Seventh Ward at all, last night?"

"Exactly. The last ones to open the Seventh Ward were, Shito… Lady Kunagisa, and that young lad over there. We have a clear record of the three of them leaving the ward after their audience with Utsurigi. Of course, **under**

**any normal circumstance**, there'd be no reason to doubt the accuracy of these logs, isn't that right, Neo?"

Once again, the professor put clear emphasis on *'under any normal circumstance'*. It's as if he were implying that there was something particular we were failing to consider. …Could it be? Was the professor saying he already figured out who the culprit… or rather, the scoundrel was? It had only been about an hour since the incident was discovered, but had we already reached the dénouement? I highly doubted it, but like Suzunashi said this morning, this wasn't a movie; I had no way to tell how much time I had left. I felt like this could be the end of it, but there's also a chance we were only half-way through. There's no way of knowing exactly how many pages remained.

My position remained uncertain.

"Then… what are you suggesting?" Neo said dubiously, as if he genuinely had no idea what he meant. His irreverent attitude, crumbling. "That certainly complicates things. That would mean no one was even there. Are you certain it's not just a mechanical error?"

"That's impossible. But you know **that**, don't you?"

"Then…" Neo gave it some thought. "The only possible culprits would be the last ones to enter, Shito, and Kunagisa and company… but that doesn't line up with Misachi's estimate for time-of-death. Professor, this is starting to look like an impossible crime."

"One more thing, Neo." The professor was overflowing with excitement. "Take a deep breath and listen. Let's keep a level-head, now. It's unbecoming for a grown man to lose his composure. While checking the logs for the Seventh ward… Uze took the opportunity to confirm the comings and goings of all the other faculty members, myself included."

"……? The other– you mean us?"

"Who else?" the professor responded heartily. Over the course of the conversation, the professor's excitement meter had been steadily rising. However, almost inverse-proportionally, my mood… or perhaps my sense of foreboding, grew ever darker. At least, that's what it felt like.

I finally understood. I still hadn't the foggiest idea what the professor was trying to say, but I finally understood where this was all leading. That's why he was acting so composed. That's why he had seemed so full-of-himself. Jones' Law: The man who can smile when things go wrong has thought of someone he can blame.

If so, then—

"Now for the results— since Uze isn't here at the moment, you'll have to hear it from me— Last night, at least during the window that Misachi provided, **not a single person left their own research ward.**"

Our breath caught in our throats.

"With one exception, that is… Kasugai,"

The professor said. Still almost entirely expressionless, Kasugai bristled when she heard her name.

"At around one in the morning, Kasugai left the Fourth Ward for around five minutes. That corresponds with the time she claimed to be *walking the dogs*. That said, it's not even worth taking into consideration. It should be obvious, but that kind of spectacle would have been impossible to create in a mere five minutes."

"……I appreciate it," Kasugai replied. It seemed like some small part of her also wanted to add, *not that I really understand.* "Thank you very much."

"…Wha-? Then, that means…" Neo stammered. "…huh? But, professor, doesn't that mean there's even less reason to suspect one of us? None of us stepped foot outside. And even if we did, there's no record of any of us entering or exiting the scene of the crime. In other words, this is-"

"An impossible crime."

Miss Kokoromi finished Neo's sentence.

"Don'tcha think, kiddo?"

"……Something like that. Still……"

Choosing my words carefully, I agreed with Miss Kokoromi. Certainly, if you took everything the professor said at face value, then theoretically— No one had entered the Seventh Ward, and what's more, no one had even gone outside in the first place. If I had to sum it up in a single phrase, it would have to be this:

A locked room.

In the truest sense.

"If this is an impossible crime—"

If that's what Professor Kyouichirou was trying to tell us, then why did he feel the need to turn away the police? Wouldn't this be the perfect time for them to make their entrance? As I wracked my brain, I was reminded of a certain pair of detectives from Kyoto. Naturally, all eyes were aimed at where

the professor was seated.

The professor wore an audacious smile.

“Impossible? What a ridiculous notion. There’s **nothing** that’s impossible in this world. Only things that aren’t possible **yet**.”

“Wait, hang on, professor. If things have already gotten this out of hand, why would you slam the door in the police’s face?” Neo put my exact concern into words. “It’s completely illogical. That doesn’t sound like the professor I know.”

“Good god, Neo, why don’t you try using that brain of yours a little? If you still can’t piece it together after everything I’ve said, you’ll remain an imbecile until the day you die.”

“An imbecile, am I?” Neo folded his arms. “My point still stands, professor.”

“We aren’t the only ones **here**, now are we?”

The professor said—

And nodded in our direction. Kunagisa, Suzunashi, and I- everyone turned to look at us. Neo looked shocked, Koutari looked unconcerned, Miss Kokoromi looked unsurprised, Kasugai looked indifferent, and Shito looked wide-eyed.

I gulped. Suzunashi’s eyes remained shut. She might have actually fallen asleep. I peered over at Kunagisa sitting next to her; she just sat there wearing the same blank expression as before, as if she wasn’t even paying attention. She was probably thinking about whether Raja Maharaja and Parapa the Rapper were related, or perhaps not. In any case, it was readily apparent that she wasn’t her usual self. I took stock of our current combat ability (though it was a depressing sight to behold) and turned to face the others.

“I can’t just let that slide, Professor Kyouichirou,” I said firmly. “You make it sound like we’re the ones who killed Utsurigi. There are certain things you just can’t say.”

“Hm? Hold on now, I haven’t said anything yet,” the professor sneered, mocking me. “What’s got you so worked up? Could it be that you’re hiding something?”

“As soon as you’re finished suspecting your own colleagues, you immediately lay the blame on us, huh? How convenient. Sure, the lodge has no security, so we were all free to come and go as we pleased, but when it comes to who could even enter the Seventh Ward, we have a clear advantage. Am I wrong? Whether we left a record or not wouldn’t have mattered;

without a registered ID, we wouldn't have been able to get inside in the first place."

"Ha-ha! Advantage? I wouldn't be so sure about that! That word's utterly meaningless!"

The professor laughed heartily, and then, as if a switch had been flipped, he fixed his eyes on me, sneered, and jabbed a finger in my direction.

"You couldn't have done it alone, **kid**. You couldn't have gotten in or out of the Seventh Ward. But you're not alone, are you? You've got something **unthinkable** lurking amongst you, isn't that right—?"

He took the finger he was pointing at me and shifted it slightly to the side— aiming it at Kunagisa Tomo.

"Isn't that right, Lady Kunagisa?"

As expected, Kunagisa didn't even acknowledge him. As if she didn't even see him, let alone hear him, she made no reaction whatsoever. That said, everyone other than Kunagisa and Suzunashi could barely contain their shock.

"Wai– Professor, that's…"

"What's the matter, Neo? Is it really that surprising? After all, that young lady had the *charisma* to form *Cluster*. She's the **ex**-leader of the victim, our **colleague** Utsurigi Gaisuke. She could break through security like that with both hands tied behind her back. Isn't that right, Lady Kunagisa?"

No response. Predictably, her lack of interest seemed to irritate the professor… or perhaps it was frustration, but the professor promptly straightened himself out and plastered a broad smile on his face, putting on a display of composure.

"What's the matter? You can't handle the truth?"

"And just how do you figure that, professor?" I noticed my speech had gotten quicker, but I managed to maintain calm. "What makes you think Kunagisa could bypass such an insane security system…?"

"That's not all she did. After bypassing it, she deleted the logs too. It would've been quite the feat if it hadn't backfired. She completely failed to consider the logs for the other wards, but that just goes to show she's just a child after all."

"That's absurd. It doesn't make any sense. Just a child? Who do you think you are? If your only argument is that Kunagisa might have been able to open the lock, then you guys could've done it t–"

"I have my reasons," the professor said. "There's a reason why

Kunagisa was the only one able to bypass that lock. It's the same reason she's the only one capable of deleting the logs. That's because, seven years ago, the one who **developed** our root programs, the one who **built** such an '*insane security system',* the one who **laid the foundation** for this very research facility at the tender age of twelve-years-old, was none other than Lady Kunagisa herself."

He continued smoothly, jabbing his finger at Kunagisa once more.

Needless to say, Kunagisa showed no reaction. She hadn't spoken a word since she saw Utsurigi's mangled corpse. Still. Could what the professor's saying be true?

"She's an unfathomable genius, the likes of which a mediocrity like you could never understand. Naturally, she's beyond my understanding as well. Nonetheless, Lady Kunagisa, it's for that very reason…I'm accusing all three of you."

"Accuse? Accuse!?" I rose from my chair. "You're out of your mind! Your ridiculous theory doesn't even make any sense!"

"Take it easy, kiddo," Miss Kokoromi butt into our argument. She had apparently lit a cigarette at some point, and her left hand gripped a can of cola. Just when did she find the time to- "Don't get your britches in a twist, it's ugly. Didn'tcha hear Suzunashi earlier?"

"……Miss."

"Professor, even if that were the case, there's still one thing I ain't clear on."

She said, pointing her cigarette at the professor. I couldn't tell what brand it was, but it was quite thin, the kind usually marketed towards women. When she lived abroad, she used to smoke cigars, so her lungs probably weren't the healthiest.

"And what might that be, Miyoshi?"

"Neo's right about what he said earlier, ain't he? The three of them came here to *rescue* Utsurigi. Don't that mean they ain't got no motive? It's as ya say professor, Miss Kunagisa here's Utsurigi's former leader- it wouldn't make a lick of sense. The three of 'em are just like us researchers, they've got no reason to kill him."

"You're as myopic as ever, Miyoshi," the professor said. "Why don't you try thinking outside the box? We're academics, are we not? Then again, you *are* a biologist, so perhaps it can't be helped…"

"Bless your heart, it almost sounds like you're disparaging an entire

field of study for no good reason, don't it? Almost like you're saying mathematics and engineering are more important just to get a rise outta us. Ain't that right, Kasugai?"

"Precisely. It's the kind of thing only a conceited engineer who thinks the whole world revolves around his calculations could say. It's utterly shameless. Perhaps his brain is fried from looking at nothing but numerals all day."

Kasugai followed Miss Kokoromi's lead.

Hm? Did cliques exist even among the sciences? I had thought scientists were all relatively alike, but I suppose that's what happens when you assume. But this probably wasn't the right time to be thinking about something so frivolous.

That said, Kasugai was the same as she was last night, cool-headed yet capable of spitting venom like it was nothing. Maybe she was my type after all, another frivolous thought floated through my head. Moving swiftly along-

"That wasn't my intention…" having earned the ire of the two female academics, the professor wore a strained smile, "…forget I said anything. Regardless, Miyoshi, don't you find Neo's assumption that they're here to *save* Utsurigi a tad baseless?"

"…baseless?" Miss Kokoromi glanced in our direction. "If I remember correctly… the reason we thought that was…umm…"

"Say for example, Lady Kunagisa came ***to kill*** Utsurigi from the very start, what then?"

"To kill…?" Miss Kokoromi's brows knit together. "But why? I don't follow."

"In other words, the reason they even came to our facility in the first place was so that they could murder Utsurigi. If they've been planning it all along, then—"

"That's insane!" I exploded. "You want to talk about baseless, then it doesn't get much more baseless than **that**. Why on earth would Kunagisa murder her *friend* and former *TEAMmate*? I can't think of a single goddamn reason—"

"Oi, oi, I'd watch your tongue, boy."

The professor gave an enigmatic shrug.

"Right now, your fate is in my hands. You should be thanking me for

turning the police away. Can't you see how generous I'm being?"

"All I can see is spite, you *Mad Daemon*."

Despite my reproach, the professor just smiled cheerfully.

"Still, the lad has a point, professor," Neo added. "Don't you think your theory's a little too far-fetched? It's not like I can't see where you're coming from, but—"

"A motive, huh?" The professor's smile faded. "Not you too, Neo. You can't possibly be suggesting that Lady Kunagisa would need a motive to murder Utsurigi, are you?"

"I—" Neo hesitated for a moment, "I am. Even if Lady Kunagisa would've been able to get past the security, even if she would've been able to delete the logs– I can't imagine someone from the Kunagisa Syndicate— someone from the very heart of the Kunagisa Syndicate— doing something as thoughtless as murdering Utsurigi—"

"That's because you don't understand, Neo."

The professor glared at Kunagisa.

"Of course you don't. You don't understand why Lady Kunagisa might've felt compelled to murder Utsurigi Gaisuke. Even I can't think of a suitable reason. But is something as trivial as that really necessary? It's not, is it? After all, that young lady—"

The professor said something similar the other day. However, this time-

"— is a ××××××××"

Before he could finish, I was already moving. It was by no means unconscious. Consciously and deliberately, I stirred my body to action. And yet, my mind was blank. With my fist clenched, I planted one foot up on the table. As I went to launch myself at the professor, something collided with my right temple. It was a cola can. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Miss Kokoromi rushing towards me. I'd thought it strange that she'd whip out a drink at a time like this; had she been expecting this to happen? I only considered that possibility after the fact; in the moment, the stimulus of Miss Kokoromi reflected in my eyes never reached my brain. I saw nothing. I heard nothing. I couldn't see. I couldn't hear. Sanguine. Everything was red. The colour of blood. Blood-red eyes. All sight and sound were drenched a deep crimson. Still, Miss Kokoromi's decisive action had succeeded in stalling my movement for but a moment. When I went to lunge at him once more, suddenly, from behind– from right behind, Suzunashi swept my legs out from under me. My body appeared to be floating mid-air just above the wide table.

In that brief moment before I landed, Suzunashi grabbed hold of my head, and with her entire body weight behind it, she slammed my body into the table full-force. The sturdy wooden table groaned. Although there's a chance it was just my bones creaking. Naturally, I had no time to brace myself, so I felt the shock of impact reverberate throughout my entire body, and yet, I still reached out towards Professor Kyouichirou. Miss Kokoromi pinned my arm to the table. She cursed me out as she slapped the side of my face that the can had ruptured against. Meanwhile, Suzunashi took hold of my other arm. The two of them. They seemed to be saying something, but I couldn't make it out. Calm down. What am I doing, what am-? No. This feels right-

I think-

At that moment, I probably lost my mind.

The moment before Suzunashi delivered the blow to the back of my neck that knocked me out, I saw something flutter at the edges of my vision. Blue hair set upon a backdrop of scarlet. But then again, I may have just been seeing things.

## 2

When I came to my senses— Rather, when I'd become sensible enough to be called sane, I was in a cell. Bare concrete floors, walls, and ceiling. Iron bars. It was dark and gloomy. The air was stale. An oppressive atmosphere hung in the air. The feeling of despair. I felt sluggish. I wanted to drift a little longer. As if I had just woken from a nightmare. Still, it couldn't have been any more nightmarish than the reality I woke up to. Such pointless thoughts pooled around my mind.

Enough already. I don't care anymore. A throbbing pain radiated across the back of my head. Nobody. Not a single person here knows when to pull their punches. Not Suzunashi, and not Miss Kokoromi either. They didn't bother with useless things like mercy. That reminds me, when I was living abroad, Miss Kokoromi used to hit me a lot too. More than half the time- No, nine times out of ten, it was for her own amusement, but in hindsight, the remaining tenth of the time she was probably in the right. Even though I say, '*in hindsight*', I have no intention of ruminating about stuff like that all this time later. Having to have it beaten into me, not stopping until it all fell apart. Honestly, I haven't grown at all since then—

"Ah! Iichan, you up?"

Kunagisa's voice shook me from my fog.

"Mornin'!"

"……mornin'," after a slight pause, I returned the greeting, picking myself up off the floor. "……umm."

I surveyed my surroundings once more.

It was the same as my half-asleep mind had perceived it, some kind of prison. Inside, Kunagisa, Suzunashi, and I all sat directly on the concrete floor.

"Oh? You came to, Inoji? Thank goodness. I was worried I punched you a little too hard and put you out for good."

"I appreciate the concern…" I felt a faint air of unease between us as I bowed my head. "So… where are we?"

"The Fourth Ward. The one Kasugai uses. This is the basement."

"…Is that right? But it looks just like a prison…"

"Apparently this is one of the cages she houses her test subjects in,"

Kunagisa said while grinning. She seemed to be enjoying herself for some reason. “He-he-he, this is my first time inside a cell, y’know. It’s always fun to try new things.”

“This would be my fifth…” I said, gripping the bars. As you might expect, they didn’t budge an inch. “Umm… I’m a little foggy about the situation… could someone explain to me why we’re in a kennel? Unless it turns out we’ve actually been monkeys the entire time, I have a feeling I’m not going to like the answer.”

“It’s the professor’s orders. Speaking of, Inoji, how much do you remember?”

“Truth be told, not much. I do remember getting clobbered by Suzunashi and Miss Kokoromi, though…” I answered her question honestly. “Let’s see… after I woke up this morning, Suzunashi came to see me on the roof…”

“You’re kidding. That long ago? It’s gonna be a pain in the ass getting you caught up.”

“Just give me a second… I just need to collect myself. I pressed my back against the concrete wall, sitting up straight. “……after that, I put Kunagisa’s hair up, and then…huh? Oh, right. …okay. I remember.”

“Yeah?” Suzunashi nodded. “That saves me an awful lot of trouble.”

“Hehehe, Iichan’s memory’s as crummy as ever. It wouldn’t be strange to forget a few things after a beating like that, though.”

“……”

Wait. If she could say all that, does that mean Kunagisa was back to normal? With that in mind, “So? What happened while I was out?” I asked Suzunashi. If Kunagisa was her usual self again, asking her would’ve been pointless.

“In short, we’re the prime suspects,” Suzunashi said, “so they locked us up.”

“……Short and sweet, thanks.”

The Fourth Ward. The one run by Kasugai. The basement… It made me feel like a lab rat. That said, whether it was better than feeling like a convict was a rather delicate question for me. To be locked up here of all places meant the professor was far crueler than I’d imagined.

Hmmm… That reminds me, during a certain murder case, I’d come up with the idea of quarantining the prime suspect. I see, so this was what it

felt like to be on the receiving end. It might be too little too late, but I resolved to never make such a suggestion again.

"So, what happens next?"

"Sadly, nothing. The professor said, *'we're going to have to ask you to wait here while we figure out what to do with you. Don't worry, no harm will come to you,'* or something along those lines."

"Is that so…?" If he didn't consider imprisoning us a form of harm, I shudder to think what would make the cut. "…Ahh, I just finished remembering…oh man."

Belatedly, I called out in surprise. I must've looked like quite the fool.

Suzunashi looked at me judgmentally. "Well, that's the short of it," she said. "I didn't think there'd be much point in resisting all by myself, so I complied… No, to be honest, I knew from the start that nothing good would come from going anywhere with you, yet here I am. Trouble seems to find you anywhere. Although this time, it seems like you were actively looking for it."

"It's not like I expected this to happen either…" Moreover, no matter how I look at it, I don't think I was even the least bit responsible for what happened. Seeing as I wasn't the one who killed Utsurigi, Suzunashi was complaining about the wrong guy. "Talk about unexpected… and just when I thought things were looking up…"

"Hehehe, that's why there's never a dull moment with Iichan around!" Kunagisa laughed delightedly. "You never have time to be bored. Life sure is fun, huh?"

"……your comrade was the one who was murdered, you know."

"Hm?" Kunagisa tilted her head. "…sure, but still, there's no point humming and hawing about things that you can't change. Humans are meant to live their lives looking forwards, y'know."

"…I forgot, that's just the kind of person you are, aren't you?"

That's right, she was. The Kunagisa that had been here a while ago must've been some kind of mistake and nothing more. Yeah. Let's go with that for now.

"Anyways, first things first… we need to figure out how to get out of this situation."

"Get out of it, huh…? Lovely goal, that." Suzunashi rattled the iron bars. "But not even I can get through these. If Asano were here, she might've

been able to do something about it though…"

"…Miiko can cut through iron?"

"Well, she can cut through konjac, at least… I've heard stories of people who can quick-draw fast enough to cut iron though. But I guess there's no point in talking about someone who's not even here."

"You got that right."

I gazed up at the ceiling. If this were a movie, then this would be the point where I'd spot a conveniently placed ventilation shaft we could escape from, but since this was reality, there was no such thing. Such a lucky break would never actually happen in real life. Good grief, no wonder the air was so stale. Damnit, they could have at least kept us somewhere more humane. Regardless, looking at it realistically, it didn't seem like there was any way to escape from our cell. It was locked tight, and the three of us had no lock picking skills to speak of.

"Still… that geezer's full of shit."

"Oh? It's not every day Iichan curses in front of others."

"It's not every day that something like this happens either. Damnit. They're not gonna make us sit around until they're ready to torture us, are they?"

Given that Miss Kokoromi was here, it was certainly a possibility. Putting aside whether she would actually go through with it, doing things that other people hated was her specialty. She didn't wind up with such a gaudy and eccentric nickname like *The Early Reaper* for no reason.

"There's no way, right? After all, that lady stopped you before you did anything, didn't she? If Iichan hit the professor, we'd be in a lot more trouble. All hell would've broken loose. Thinking about it like that, maybe Kokoromi-chan's a good person after all."

"A good person, huh…? I suppose there's a chance."

Ignorance is bliss. Hmph, while I was unconscious, it seems like Suzunashi had given Kunagisa a lecture on Miss Kokoromi. Since it was Suzunashi, she probably painted a fairly harmless picture of her.

"And by the way, Iichan, nothing the professor said was all that crazy. It makes sense enough."

"What? In what way? It's about as absurd as you can get. It's not even a stretch, it's like he didn't bother trying to make sense at all. A grade schooler who hasn't even memorized their times tables yet could come up

with a better theory than that."

"I can't multiply either, you know–" Suzunashi butt-in. "I dropped out before we learned how."

"……" "……"

"? Feel free to continue?"

"Oh… uhh, what were we talking about again?" The shock made me forget. "Right, we're talking about how the professor's off his rocker. It's way too far-fetched. Let's see if I've got this right: no one left their research ward, and no one entered the Seventh ward, therefore Kunagisa and crew are the culprits. What kind of logic is that? Even Goldbach's conjecture makes more sense."

"Crew, eh?" Kunagisa giggled deviously. It seems she'd taken a liking to my choice of words. "Yup, crew's perfect. *Crew*, it has a nice ring to it, hehehe."

"……well, it's better than Kunagisa and her band of merry men at least… And stop trying to change the subject. I've got enough on my plate already… In what way does the professor's theory make any sense? Being the former leader of *Cluster* doesn't automatically mean *Lady Kunagisa* could've easily cracked a lock as crazy as that. Honestly, what a crock of—"

"I could've." Kunagisa stated plainly.

"——……Come again?"

"I could've opened it." She repeated. "Easily, too."

"Easily?" "Easy as pie."

Kunagisa didn't leave even the hair's breadth required to start a new paragraph between my question and her reply; it left me gripping my head.

"…Just what are you trying to say, Lady Kunagisa?"

"The professor already mentioned it, didn't he? The one who laid the groundwork for that system was me, y'know. To be fair, I also had a little help from Nao-kun and Micchan. I knew exactly what kind of mechanism it was before I even looked at it."

Micchan— Kasumioka Douji. A good friend of Nao's, and, to borrow Neo's phrasing, someone who was once close to *'the very heart of the Kunagisa Syndicate'*. Currently— well, leaving what they're currently up to aside, back in the day, before I met Kunagisa, Nao, Kasumioka, and Kunagisa were attached at the hip. That said, Nao and Kasumioka were less than amateurs when it came to mechanical engineering. Which means, it's

probably safe to assume Kunagisa had developed the entire system by herself.

"—Still, without your tools, there's not much you could've done. If there were locks that you could open just by knowing how they work, everyone would be a picklock. Even I know how the mechanism on my front door works, but without my key, I'd be out of luck."

"Yup, you've got a point." Kunagisa nodded. "That's why, unless you're someone like Jun-chan, it'd be pretty hopeless. But— let's see, what about this, Iichan? When we got to the facility, you wrote our names on the visitor registry, right?"

"Huh? Hang on, you were watching? I thought you were completely focused on your game."

"I wasn't gaming, I'll have you know… But do you remember what the security guard said? Something about how the old school method is harder to tamper with than if it was digital?"

"I think so?" It'd been so long that I'd forgotten. "But so what if he did?"

"It means, high-tech systems have high-tech loopholes. Specifically, I could have done it when I went to visit Sacchan at the Seventh Ward. I coulda taken the opportunity to borrow a computer from Sacchan and use it to gain access to some kind of mother computer in the Primary Ward. Then I coulda registered myself as a new faculty member. Using a bootable business card, of course. Finally, after murdering Sacchan, I'd delete it all. I'd even use a tool to scrub the logs; it woulda been like the doors had *never opened at all*."

On the face of it, it seemed all too straightforward. However, that's only because Kunagisa's explanation had been dumbed down quite a lot; in reality, there would have been plenty of protections, firewalls, safeguard programs, and alarms she would have needed to bypass.

—But this is Kunagisa we're talking about.

It was certainly possible. Kunagisa Tomo already boasted vast technological know-how, so if she had also known the security's core systems *inside-out*, then-

Bafflingly enough, the professor was right.

"When it comes to computer security, there's this thing called administrator access, y'see. So at the very least, he's right that I would've had a huge advantage over everyone else. Come to think of it, Hiichan was always the best at breaking through security… I was no slouch either, though."

"*Hiichan* was *Double-Flick*, right?"

“Huh? Wowow, I’m shocked! Iichan’s memory’s actually functioning normally? Wait, I guess it’s normal for it not to function at all, so when it works, it’s actually functioning abnormally, I suppose.”

“Don’t say something so rude so innocently. Utsurigi kept mentioning them. Their name came up almost as much as yours and Chee-kun’s.”

“Hmph. I’ll never understand that man.”

To get Kunagisa of all people to say something like that about you, you would have to be beyond help. Still, nothing good ever comes from speaking ill of the dead. Even in the case of oddballs like Utsurigi. Crucified and murdered— No, I’ve got that backwards. Utsurigi Gaisuke was murdered and then crucified. If they heard about what happened here, would Hiichan, or Chee-kun, or Acchan, or any of his former *TEAMmates* mourn him? Since I didn’t know any of them personally, there was no way for me to know.

“Still, what was up with that message? 《You just watch, 『DEAD BLUE』!!》,was it? If you were to put it in Japanese, it’d be something like ‘*maa miteiro yo, Shisen no Ao’*, right?”

“Who knows? Aren’t they just warning me not to *do anything unnecessary*? They’re tying up loose ends, right? He-he-he.” As if she found it amusing to refer to herself as a proverbial *loose end*, Kunagisa giggled to herself. The amount of guts it took to laugh at a play-on-words like that was enough to unnerve even someone like me.

“Anything unnecessary…? Like trying to rescue Utsurigi? But it kinda defeats the point to leave a message like that if they just killed him anyway.”

“We might have no choice but to leave that question for later… If you’ve got time to worry about something like that, then you really oughta focus on why the culprit mercilessly mangled Sacchan’s body like that, or why they stole his arms.”

“If we’re talking about reasons someone might go out of their way to dice someone to pieces, then the first thing that comes to mind is some kind of grudge…”

That said, I couldn’t picture Utsurigi, who hadn’t stepped foot outside that building in over a year, having done something to warrant such a wretched fate. Of course, that only goes for *his time at the facility*— if we take into account all the terrible things he did during his *TEAM* days, then perhaps this kind of thing was unavoidable, so I couldn’t dismiss the possibility.

“Still, even if you could get past that lock, you’d still be lacking a

reason… or need to kill Utsurigi. Besides, when you were in the Seventh Ward, you were with me or Shito the entire time, weren't you? You were on your own when talking to Utsurigi, but there's no computer in that room. Getting access to the mother computer would've been impossible, wouldn't it?"

"Ha-ha, what a blissful thing to say, Inoji," Suzunashi laughed. "The professor couldn't care less about little inconsistencies like that."

"—What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means **even the slightest** justification would be more than enough. The professor doesn't actually believe that Blue is the culprit. Probably. It's like you said, Inoji. It's just a matter of how far he can **stretch** it. That's why there's bound to be some time lag."

"Time lag—?"

"Exactly. Right about now, the professor… along with his entire faculty, is trying to come up with *evidence that implicates Kunagisa and crew.* Someone– I think it was Kasugai– said, '*give them five hours and they'll have figured out what to do with you.'* We were just discussing that before you woke up."

"…And?"

"Essentially, Iichan," Kunagisa spoke listlessly, "the professor's probably trying to make me Sacchan's replacement."

I was speechless. Kunagisa—Utsurigi's replacement? That's- That would be-

"In exchange for not turning her over to the police, they'll have her play along with their research— no, their **experiments**."

"But… that's insane."

"Sure is. But that's the situation we find ourselves in," Suzunashi seemed somewhat resigned. "I'm not sure what they have planned for me and Inoji, but… let's see, they'll probably use us as hostages to keep Blue in check. That's what I'd do, anyway."

"That's…"

That said, Kunagisa Tomo would make a suitable replacement for Utsurigi Gaisuke. No, she'd be one hell of an upgrade. If Kunagisa was right about what the professor was **up to**, that is. When it came to guinea pigs, there were none more suitable than Kunagisa Tomo. Utsurigi had been fine enough, but Kunagisa was simply the best.

*The Ultimate Human Dogma*.

"I… I— won't let that bastard-"

"Whoa now, don't blow another gasket. If I have to deal with **that** alone, I'm not confident I could pull it off without hurting you. It only turned out okay last time because I had Miyoshi helping me. So unless you're okay with me breaking half your bones, I'd hold off if I were you."

"…I'm fine. I'm calm," I said, slamming my fist against the concrete wall. It hurt. "I'm completely calm."

"Hehehe," Kunagisa laughed cheerfully (despite the conversation being about her). "This really takes me back. Being in a pinch like this, facing a crisis-like situation, and stuff."

Crisis-like? What's that?

"…You're really enjoying yourself, aren't you?"

"Pretty much. Still, this is nothing compared to what happened the first time I met Iichan. I mean, it's not like we're gonna get murdered or anything."

"…One thing's for sure, coming here was completely pointless," I said. "Now then, what do we do now? Any ideas, Suzunashi?"

"There's nothing we *can* do," she said. "When I don't come back, Asano will probably catch on and take some kind of action… but that wouldn't be for another couple days."

"I can't do anything either, not locked up thirty metres underground, anyways. They took away my cell phone, and I don't have my PDA either. We're hopeless, helpless, and weightless."

"No, we still have that last one."

I let out a dejected sigh.

"It looks like… there's no way out of this dire situation after all."

"—Oh, but there is."

As natural as could be, as if it were simply a matter of course, a voice cut through my despondency. As if it had been waiting its turn, it struck with perfect timing. It wasn't Suzunashi's voice, nor was it Kunagisa's, and it obviously wasn't mine; it came from beyond the iron bars.

There, with her arms crossed, stood Ishimaru Kouta.

Without so much as a footstep, hint of her presence, or any kind of advanced warning, she was simply there.

Her denim hunting cap, pulled low, with her denim coat and high-laced boots. The sharp gaze that peeked out from behind her glasses peered down at us. She was grinning, as if she found our predicament amusing— just like Kunagisa, she was smiling as if she were enjoying herself from the bottom of her heart.

"—Greetings to those of you with whom I'm not yet acquainted. And to you, my *dear friend*, a simple hello will do. My name is Ishimaru Kouta." In the gloom of the basement, I could just barely make out her features; her lips curled as she looked down her nose at us. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Warily, Suzunashi knit her brows, assuming a guarded stance. Kunagisa's eyes went wide as she gazed in wonder. And, with my back still pressed against the concrete wall, I stood up.

"…Yo, Kouta. Thanks for last night," Carefully, carefully, extremely carefully, I chose my next words. "What a coincidence meeting you here."

"'A 'serendipitous encounter' would be more fitting, *dear friend*." Her brazen manner and overly-familiar choice of words sounded almost tongue-in-cheek. "Honestly, how cliché."

"…What happened? What are you doing in a place like this? Don't tell me you got lost?"

"Heavens, no. Nothing of the sort, *dear friend*. Nothing of the sort," Kouta snickered as she tried to stifle her laughter. "I heard they had an exotic animal caged up down here, so I came to see what the fuss was about. Supposedly, this animal **lunged** at Professor Shadou Kyouichirou."

"……"

"You don't laugh, do you?" Kouta said after a pause. She sounded a little bored. "Smiling is a fundamental pillar of communication, don't you know? How do you expect to maintain a consummate set of relationships without it? Or perhaps you don't concern yourself with such matters?"

"I thank you for your gracious advice, Ishimaru Kouta. But I'd rather die than laugh for no reason." I gave a half-hearted nod. "Now then, do you have some business with us? How did you get in here anyhow?"

"A fine question. However, I'll have to insist we save that bit of fun for later—" Kouta took her eyes off me and gazed over at Kunagisa and

Suzunashi. “Oh ho, two ladies in a cage? Now there’s a lovely sight.”

She said it in a way implied the third occupant somehow spoiled the view.

Suzunashi chuckled lightly at Kouta’s abrupt non sequitur.

“You’re pretty popular, huh, Inoji? Who’d’ve thought you had two acquaintances in a remote place like this,” instead of talking to Kouta, she addressed me. “And they’re both women too. You’re basically Ariwara no Narihara.”

“Right…” I didn’t really understand the comparison.

“So, how do you two know each other, you and this lovely lady here?”

“Yesterday, I propositioned this fine gentleman, but I was soundly rejected.”

Before I could get a word in, Kouta answered for me. The nerve.

“Isn’t that right, *dear friend*?”

“…Yeah. Well, about a tenth of it is true, anyhow.”

“Even ten percent of truth is more than enough, is it not?” Her tone was different somehow. “However, it appears your circumstances have changed. I don’t suppose you might reconsider…?”

“No one likes an overly persistent woman,” Suzunashi said, finally addressing Kouta. “Just ask your *dear friend* here.”

Unfazed, Kouta simply said, “perhaps.” It was like she had taken all of Suzunashi’s animosity, and deflected it without even trying. While she may have made it seem like nothing, I knew for a fact that it was a monstrous feat.

“Unfortunately, I just don’t know when to give up. …I’d be ever so grateful if you could reign in your hostility a bit. I don’t have to be your enemy. In fact, I bet we’d get along swimmingly… especially you.” She nodded in my direction. “Don’t you agree, *dear friend?”*

“Earlier you said you *heard* about us?” Instead of answering Kouta, Suzunashi responded with a question of her own. “You said you *heard about us* and that’s why you’re here, didn’t you? You know what that tells me? It tells me that someone told you we were locked up down here.”

“—Oh my, did I say that? Oh well, it’s of no importance. You’re as shrewd as you look—Suzunashi, was it?” She grinned even wider than before. “However, I wish you’d focus that shrewdness somewhere else. I said it from

the beginning, didn't I? *There's a way out*. Don't you think that should take precedence right now?"

A way out. A way out of this dire situation.

Predictably, Suzunashi grew quiet. Taking a quick glance at Kunagisa, she was frozen in the same pose as when Kouta first appeared. Her eyes wide, her head tilted. Every once in a while, her brain would freeze like this.

*Clap*, Kouta clasped her hands together in front of her.

"Essentially, what I'm asking is this: '*shall I lend you a hand*?'"

My expression suddenly stiffened.

I remembered last night.

"——……"

"You don't trust me, do you? You're suspicious of me, are you not? I sympathize with your concern. I wouldn't trust anyone who appeared out of the blue with such an offer either. That's just common sense. However…"

Kouta reached into her pocket and fished out a knife. The knife was narrow and pointed, almost like an awl, or perhaps the shaft of an arrow. Additionally, the blade was quite short; all in all, it didn't look like a particularly user-friendly design. That's right, this blade was never intended to stab people or shred things, but instead, its main purpose was to serve as a type of *anti-lock blade—*

"Oh my, are you familiar with knives like these? Then I needn't waste my breath explaining it." Kouta made a show of twirling the knife, slicing the air. "This knife was a present from a dear friend, so I can't be too rough with it. That said—"

With that, she inserted the knife into the keyhole of the lock holding the iron bars shut. *Rattle rattle,* she jimmied the lock two or three times followed by the sound of something coming undone, then the latch on the cell door released. *Creaaak*, the rusty door slowly swung open.

"—this isn't a matter of trust or doubt, but pragmatism."

"…What do you want?"

Hearing my question, Kouta made a wicked expression.

"How uncouth. Didn't your mother teach you to show gratitude when someone helps you?"

"Unfortunately, I grew up exceptionally spoiled… Because of that, I wound up somewhat distrusting of others."

"That's rather consummate, my *dear friend.*" Kouta smiled elegantly. "'Tis a trivial matter. It's certainly not something you need to fret over. Naturally, my proposition is the exact same as the one I made last night, *dear friend*."

"…Is that so?"

I nodded tentatively.

The same request as last night. In other words-

"…And what if I were to refuse again?"

"Nothing. That is consummate in its own right. Feel free to refuse to your heart's content. In that case, we would simply go our separate ways." Kouta showed me her palms in what seemed like a small act of capitulation. "You see, I was raised to always maintain a certain level of decorum. Not by my parents, mind you… Regardless, *'If you expect others to show you kindness, you must first offer kindness expecting nothing in return.'* Everything **thus far** has been a service."

"…I see."

Just how far could I trust her?

My lexicon doesn't contain a word to describe anything as ridiculous as putting '*faith*' in a stranger you've just met, and '*trust*' was out of the question. And so, this woman— Ishimaru Kouta, didn't strike me as trustworthy, but as a dangerous individual I needed to treat with the utmost caution. That's how I felt last night, and I felt that way still.

Moreover, the fact that she had chosen *Zerozaki* as her fake surname was the most frightening thing of all. I heard it from Red. '*No one would ever label themselves a Zerozaki,'* and yet, the person standing right in front of me had not only openly worn that label, but had succeeded in infiltrating this facility without even trying to hide. What did that say about her?

But still— how much worse could our situation get?

"Kishimaru, was it?" as I was hesitating over how to answer Kouta's request, Suzunashi spoke up. "Kishimaru, you see-"

"…The name is Ishimaru," Kouta replied, somewhat annoyed. "Ishimaru Kouta. Please get it right."

"Apologies," Suzunashi gave a slight shrug. "It's a generous proposal, but I'm afraid we won't be taking you up on it— I don't know what it is you

want with Inoji, but it's not going to happen."

"Oh? And why is that?" Kouta tilted her head in an exaggerated fashion. "Perhaps my **proposal** is something mind-numbingly simple? Perhaps I need a two-thousand-yen bill, or a coupon?"

"It was never much of a deal in the first place," Suzunashi said. "We'd never make it out. Or rather, even if we did make it out, it'd be pointless. Even if we left this cage, it's not like it'd make a difference, right? I'm right, aren't I, Inoji?"

"…Yeah."

That's right. It was just as Suzunashi said. Even if we were to escape this cage, we'd never even make it out of Kasugai's Fourth Ward. This building had no windows, and the only entrance was— lorded over by that troublesome *security lock*. If, and this is a pretty big *'if'*, everything Kunagisa had said was true, then we might be able to pull it off. If we were to use one of the many computers bound to be in this ward to access the mother computer and gain administrator access, then we'd be able to disable the lock. With that, we'd probably be able to leave the ward. And from there, it's even possible we'd be able to figure a way out of the facility. But even then, the Fiat was likely impounded, and the security at the gate would undoubtedly be heightened. Moreover, among the three of us, the only one with the stamina to make it down the mountain on foot would be Suzunashi.

Even if we ignore the countless obstacles ahead of us and make the outrageously optimistic assumption that our escape would be successful, if Professor Kyouichirou contacted the police, we'd just end up arrested anyhow. The professor would likely be more than happy with that outcome as well.

"—That's why it makes no difference whether we stay here or not, Kouta,"

Suzunashi laughed bitterly.

"We're boxed in on all sides with enemies on all fronts."

"No no, you're merely boxed in on most sides with enemies on most fronts. It helps no one to be pessimistic," Kouta winked. "**That's precisely why** we should make a deal. I have no intention of making a proposition that doesn't also benefit my compatriots. After all, if my benefit isn't directly correlated with yours, then we can hardly consider this a true team effort."

Honestly, what a lovely way of thinking. I even found myself agreeing with her. Everything Kouta said was completely correct. But still, it's not like that's all it was.

"So what do you suggest? Is this where we circle back to that *way out* you mentioned?"

"Precisely, *dear friend.* I'd expect nothing less from the man who caught my eye… how sharp, how sharp indeed."

"……"

I kept quiet and waited for Kouta to continue. Suzunashi did the same. I had my doubts about whether Kunagisa had even been listening, but she was silent nonetheless.

"—you need only find the ***true culprit*** and prove yourselves innocent."

Kouta spoke eventually.

"If you do, Professor Kyouichirou will be left without reason to detain you. Am I mistaken?"

"—the *true culprit?*"

The true culprit behind Utsurigi Gaisuke's murder and subsequent crucifixion. The one who landed us in this mess in the first place.

"—that's-"

I brought a hand to my mouth, lost in thought. I turned Kouta's words over and over again in my mind. That's it. I'd been careless. When all was said and done, **someone** had to have done it. Rather than focusing on the absurdity of Professor Kyouichirou's rambling theory, I should have realized that there was a better solution. That's right. As long as I could successfully find that solution, then I could bring Professor Kyouichirou's plan crashing down around his ears.

This was a secluded location. Closed off from the outside. The conditions were severely limiting. In that case, the true culprit– if the true culprit **was really one of us** then– That– That would certainly–

"That would certainly be…"

"Worth a shot, right?" Suzunashi finished my sentence. "It's certainly worth trying, but it sounds like a pipe dream. It's always nice to aim big, but we don't have nearly enough time. Kasugai said they'll *come to a decision in the next five hours*. If they do, we're finished. It's already been an hour since then, so we've only got four hours left. There's no way we can figure out the culprit in just—"

"Four hours!" Kouta interrupted in a sing-song voice. "Four hours, you say? We may as well have an eternity. In fact, we may even have too

much time." Kouta turned to me excitedly. "—Right? Don't you agree, *dear friend*?"

"…With **your** help, it would seem so, Kouta."

I nodded begrudgingly.

Suzunashi was right, we were in a tight spot. Miss Kokoromi had also been right about this not being another senseless murder, it was a *locked room* — a *hard-locked* room we couldn't begin to explain. In other words, an impossible crime. The needlessly strict mechanical gatekeeper, the reason Utsurigi was so viciously crucified, and the meaning behind that bloody message. It was a daunting enough challenge on its own, let alone with a time limit.

However,

It was just as Kouta said, this might be our best chance. Even if it meant making the worst choice at the same time.

"So? What shall it be? I shan't force you to do anything."

Kouta extended her right hand through the iron bars. Suzunashi didn't say anything else, neither did Kunagisa.

I steeled my resolve and took her hand.

It felt like I had grasped the hand of a human.

**3**

Suzunashi and Kunagisa stayed behind in the cage while Kouta and I set off to **act**. It would be an exaggeration to say we split into a reserve force and an advance force, but since there was no way we could meander about as one big group, we all agreed that someone would have to remain in the cell. That said, we couldn't leave someone on their own (there was no guarantee Kasugai wouldn't return before the four hours were up, so if our *escape* was discovered, being alone wouldn't just be frightening, it would be dangerous), and since we couldn't leave the intruder, Kouta, behind (I'd suggested as much, but it was flatly rejected. Obviously), that meant, among the three of us — Kunagisa, Suzunashi, and I— only one would be part of the advance force. Suzunashi was the first to decline ("because I'm dumb"), so the choice was between Kunagisa and me. Objectively, Kunagisa was clearly smarter than me, but it didn't feel right entrusting Kunagisa to a suspicious individual like Kouta, and besides, I couldn't imagine Kunagisa being able to keep a low profile. She wouldn't last two seconds outside the cage before being caught. Since professor Kyouichirou's sole target was Kunagisa, even if worse came to worst, as long as Kunagisa was still locked up, he wouldn't do anything rash— he wouldn't. Joining the advance force was my only option.

It was a similar conundrum to *the chicken, the fox, and the grain*.

I left the cell.

"—what a load of nonsense."

I muttered my usual line and made my way over to Kouta. Kouta pulled her cap low once again and said, "I'm counting on you, so without further ado, let us begin. We can't spend all day dawdling in a place like this."

"—Right. We can't." I nodded, then I turned back towards the cage and said, "Well then, Suzunashi, I'll leave everything here to you… take care of Kunagisa."

"Given the circumstances, I can't say I'm bursting with confidence. Still, leave it to me," Suzunashi said. "Inoji, our lives are in your hands."

I wound up entrusted with something unthinkable.

Counting on, relying on, and entrusting one another.

Hang on, isn't this-?

It's almost like we trusted one another.

“Iichan,”

Kunagisa said abruptly.

“If things go bad… if Iichan really thinks he can’t do it, feel free to call Nao-kun.”

“……”

Call Nao. I knew exactly what that meant. If Kunagisa was ever in **direct** danger, we were to rely on that man’s power.

“…Understood. I’ll do that then. But only if things go belly up.”

“One more thing, Iichan. Do you remember?” Kunagisa continued, looking up at me from her seated position. “I told you something a long time ago. One of *TEAM’s* rules was that we promised *never to leak information about other members*.”

“…Yeah, I think you mentioned it. It sounds familiar at least.”

“I’m breaking that promise,”

Kunagisa said.

“——Yesterday, Sacchan said something like this, ‘*it might be time for me to* ***restore my wicked name***.’”

**Restore his wicked name**.

Utsurigi’s name— *Malignant Green*. A pseudonym he’d earned by committing atrocity after atrocity during his time as *TEAM’s* ultimate disruptor. And he wanted to live up to a name like that? He wanted to reclaim it? That’s- Why would Utsurigi, condemned to crucifixion and long gone, say something like that? No, still, more importantly-

“Why tell me that now?”

“It didn’t seem fair not to. We’re short on time, so that’s all I can say. I just wanted you to know,” Kunagisa said in an uncharacteristically distant tone of voice. “Hey, Iichan. You wouldn’t abandon me, or hate me or anything, right?”

“Never.”

I answered immediately.

I was able to give an immediate answer.

The one who was most relieved by that fact was likely not Kunagisa, but myself.

“Don’t make me state the obvious. It’s a pain to even have to answer those kinds of questions. **Something like this** is nothing to us, Tomo.”

“That’s right. Thank goodness,”

And with that, Kunagisa beamed me her usual innocent smile. That was all I needed. I steeled my resolve and said, “Let’s get going, Kouta.” She nodded. “First thing’s first, let’s talk strategy.” We began walking.

“We need a firm grasp on the situation. To that end, we first need to leave this building.”

“Exactly. I think I asked you already, but how did you get inside in the first place, Kouta.”

“I was just about to explain that to you. For the time being, please come with me.”

I shadowed Kouta as she plodded on ahead. We quickly rounded a corner and the cage faded out of sight; I could no longer see Kunagisa or Suzunashi.

That’s when Kouta let out a chuckle.

“—What’s so funny?”

“‘Tis nothing, pay me no mind. Would you call it friendship, love, or perhaps neither? The two of them are plenty alluring, but which one does your heart desire, my *dear friend*?”

“It’s not like that. Not with Suzunashi, and not with Kunagisa either. My heart belongs to the samurai-like lady who lives next door,” I responded curtly. “Besides, it’s not like that’s any of your business, is it?”

“Oh ho, of course it isn’t. ‘Tis none of my concern. You and I are of no relation, and that’s consummate enough. That said, is it so unusual to want to know more about the partner with whom you are bound in life and death, my *dear friend*?”

“I have no intention of committing a lovers’ suicide with you, Kouta,” I tried my best to sound nonchalant about it. “And if you want to go there, it seems like you know an awful lot about us already, but I don’t know the first thing about you. I can’t help feeling a little uneasy about that.”

“Uneasy? Marvellous. Please keep it that way. That would work out best for both of us,” Kouta kept walking at the same brisk pace as she answered. “So long as you keep your promise, you shan’t hear a complaint from me. I’m being sincere when I say, trust isn’t something I want from you.”

“That’s awfully pragmatic.”

“It’s realistic.”

It was an utterly meaningless exchange. Part of me wondered if this was okay, the other part of me preferred it this way. After all, at that moment, I had no choice but to rely on this woman.

“—Over here,”

Kouta gestured to a green iron door. She undid the lock with her awl-shaped knife and pushed the door open. Inside was a stairwell that continued to the upper floors. By the looks of it, it was some kind of emergency staircase.

“—Is this where you came from?”

“Precisely. The elevator is far too loud, you see. If we use it, we shall be detected right away. Now, pick up the pace. We have a time limit, do we not? It would be consummate if you could hurry.”

While I hesitated, Kouta had already begun climbing the stairs. She didn’t show even the slightest hint of indecision. In other words, she had expected things to play out this way from the very start. That I’d put up with her request. That I’d do whatever she told me to. Everything was going according to plan. I lightly shook my head and planted a foot on the first step. The door closed on its own, and I heard the sound of it locking behind me. Apparently, it had a simple automated locking mechanism.

“One slight correction,” Kouta said. “It’s as you say, everything is more or less proceeding according to plan; however, there is one thing that I didn’t account for.”

“……I hadn’t even said anything yet.”

“I was convinced that winning you over would take a little more time,” Kouta ignored my interjection and continued on. “Given your attitude last night, that is. Naturally, this outcome is far more consummate. Still, you didn’t strike me as the particularly understanding sort. Even with your back against the wall, I never expected you to acquiesce so easily. Why did you?”

“I have…an acquaintance.” I let out a sigh and began to answer. “They’re someone like you. No, you’re nothing alike. It’s not like I even begin to understand you, and I definitely don’t understand them, but… taxonomically, I feel like you two would share a classification.”

“…Is that so? Colour me intrigued.”

“Then again, they’re what you might call a jack-of-all-trades, or well,

a contractor," I said. "Not a thief like yourself."

"—Oh ho, I see. That, too, is consummate… Not to sound like Miss All-black, but you're surprisingly popular. In any case, it's splendid that we could settle things so quickly."

Miss All-Black? Who's that? Ahh, she must have meant Suzunashi.

Blowing past the door on the first-floor landing, Kouta continued her climb towards the second floor.

"……? We're still going up? The only way in or out is on the first floor, isn't it?"

"Isn't the fact that you can't use that entrance the reason you're in this mess to begin with? If the ordinary method is out of the question, then 'tis only consummate to try something out of the ordinary. Or rather… there's something more important to consider. How do you want to go about this?"

"How do I-? Are you being vague on purpose?"

"Not at all. It's just that, this case… how confident are you that you'll be able to solve it without further incident? I figured I ought to get that question out of the way."

"Things could hardly get much worse. We got locked up in a kennel… Still, confidence, huh? ……There's only one thing I can say for certain." I hadn't meant to mimic Kouta by giving such a vague answer. "I've experienced this pattern countless times already. There wasn't a case among them that I couldn't solve."

"…You're unexpectedly self-assured. I'm a little surprised."

"I'm speaking from experience. That's all. …if anything, this all feels a little lacking." There was no emotion in my voice. "Compared to the incident that ruined Kunagisa and I, something like this falls woefully short. Kunagisa's former comrade having his eyes gouged out, throat pierced, chest carved open, bowels gutted, legs skewered, arms removed, and his crucifixion topped off with a sentence scrawled in his own blood, all within a locked room– well, it might score a sixty."

"'Tis still a passing grade."

"Perhaps. …That said, this is my first time with a time limit. Four hours…… maybe less. We need to be back before then."

"In the unlikely event that you're unable to solve the case before the four hours are up, what do you plan to do then?" Kouta said. "Despite what I said in front of Miss All-black, it'd be troublesome if you were to rely on me

too much. My objective lies elsewhere, and while our alliance may have landed us in the same boat, 'tis not like we have to be thrilled about it."

"I'm well aware. And don't worry, I'm certainly not thrilled. But still… in the event I fail, huh?"

"Would you call that… *'Nao-kun'* fellow?"

Kouta lowered her voice slightly.

"That's my last resort. No, if forming a united front with you was the worst choice I could make, then calling Nao would have to be the lowest."

If I made that choice— If Kunagisa Nao was made aware of the kind of treatment his little sister, Kunagisa Tomo, was subject to– forget four hours, this whole incident would be settled in under four seconds. Nao would use every ounce of power at his disposal to resolve this case— No, without a doubt, he'd **quash** it. However, that's– That's the one thing that I–

"—If at all possible, that's a measure I'd rather not take."

"……Hmm? I'm not sure I understand… but I do recognize your apprehension. So, what then? Would you pass the torch to that '*contractor*' you mentioned earlier?"

"In all honesty… that's also something I'd rather avoid," I answered truthfully. "It has nothing to do with whether it'd be a good idea or not, it's just… let's see. It's because I want to be their friend. I want to **just** be friends. I'd rather avoid any unnecessary give-and-take or debts of gratitude, and the last thing I want is a business relationship,"

I said, but the truth had been that I already owed her a fair deal.

"I wouldn't have been against asking for their help with something as simple as rescuing Utsurigi, but now that things have escalated like this, it's already more than I can ask of them."

"You're afraid of bothering them *because* they're your friend? Is that not backwards? What is a friend if not someone you can turn to in your time of need?"

"To me? All kinds of things."

That kind of thing was hard to define. Its edges, fuzzy and hard to make out. In order to get a firm grasp on it, I'd have to spend a considerable amount of time ruminating over it, and frankly, I wasn't willing to put in the effort. Especially given current circumstances.

"To me, living is one big contradiction." It was a conclusion I'd just reached. "I'm glad I was able to become their friend. I'm glad we can share a

meaningless conversation, or a meal, or a room for the night. I'm glad I can get spoiled, teased, hit, or picked on by someone as amazing as that. All in all, I'm glad I get to be their friend. That's why, one day, I want them to feel glad that they were mine. It may be stupid, but that's just how it is."

"—Is that so? …Well, that's certainly consummate of you." Some part of what I said must have struck a chord with Kouta because she briefly looked back over her shoulder and flashed me a cheerful expression. Surprisingly, I found her smile quite pleasant. "So what do you have in mind? If it's starting to look like you won't solve the case in time, that is. Let me say this now, I don't think it's possible to reason with the professor. That *Mad Daemon*'s hard at work on his nefarious dealings as we speak; you won't have any luck trying to talk him down."

"…You were listening to our conversation?"

"Part of it. Something about how he aims to use Kunagisa as Utsurigi's substitute, or what have you."

"Is that so? Nothing gets past you, it seems… Let's see… in that case, I guess it can't be helped. I'd give up."

"A lie, no doubt," came Kouta's immediate reply. "You don't strike me as someone who'd give up so easily."

"Really? Maybe you're right."

However, I hadn't lied to her. It was the honest to goodness truth. My true feelings on the matter. If things did play out that way, I'd give up. I'd stop trying to resolve this cleanly. I'd give up on putting an end to it without having to dirty my hands. Now that things had gotten this dire, I didn't have the luxury of worrying about the last shreds of normalcy I've barely managed to cling onto these past nineteen years. I quietly confirmed that the knife in my jacket pocket hadn't been taken from me.

"Let's move on. 'Tis not consummate to only consider the worst-case scenario. We should set our sights on a brighter future."

With that, Kouta finished her ascent up the stairs. Wait, finished? In other words, this was— it couldn't be—

"—The roof?"

"Indeed," Kouta said, nodding as she unlocked the door with the knife. "The roof."

Following Kouta, I stepped out onto the rooftop. The roof was tiled, with a clothesline directly in front of us. It must've been built for the purpose of drying laundry; however, the clothesline didn't look like it had ever seen

any use. If anything, the place lacked any human presence at all. It was enough to make me question whether anyone had set foot up here since the day of its construction.

A handful of puddles had formed on the tile. No doubt, remnants of last night.

When I lifted my gaze, I was treated to a sweeping view of the surrounding scenery. It was quite stunning. The cedar forest stretched out from beyond the castle wall. There was hardly a man-made object in sight, it was truly picturesque. If anything, the amount of nature on display almost felt unnatural.

But this was no time to soak in the sights.

"I'd ask you not to get too close to the edge. The research wards are without windows, so the chances of getting spotted are slim, but that doesn't mean you won't be seen by anybody moving between wards," Kouta said as she made her own way towards the roof's edge. Still unsure of what we were doing there, I followed after her.

"Umm, Kouta? You're not about to suggest we rappel down the building or anything, right?"

"That wouldn't be an unconsummate idea, but if that were the case, it'd do nothing to explain how I **got into** the ward in the first place." Kouta's feet shuffled to a stop nearly at the edge of the rooftop that faced the Fifth Ward. Once there, she stood tall.

"…Well then, if you would please follow me."

Not even a moment later, she took a single step back and leapt with all her might. She leapt. In other words, just before the ledge— or rather, directly on it. She planted her foot less than a millimetre away from the small eavestrough that carried the rain water away. Just beyond– lay thin air, and–

The Fifth Ward.

So nimbly that I half expected it to come accompanied by a *'woosh'* sound effect, Kouta touched down on the other side before turning back to face me. Her two decorative braids, coming to rest across her shoulders a few moments later.

"—Alright, whenever you're ready."

"'*Whenever you're ready*,' she says…" Naturally, I shrunk back. "Ready for what, exactly?"

"It's nothing to balk at. There's no way a grown man wouldn't be

able to handle a measly two metre jump. Am I mistaken?"

Two metres. Certainly, the gap between the Fourth Ward and the Fifth Ward was about that wide. The impression I had yesterday was spot on; the buildings at this research facility were constructed suffocatingly close together. However, the distance was not the problem.

Standing over the edge, I peered down. As I thought, the building was four stories tall. That said, since the ceilings were designed to be higher than your average building's, even a conservative estimate would place us ten metres above the ground. A fall from this height would be more than enough to kill you, even if you landed on your feet.

Of course, something like leaping two metres would've been no sweat. However, if failure meant death, then it's only natural that confidence would turn to apprehension.

"What's this? Have you caught the jitters? I didn't think such a thing was possible. I never would've guessed my *dear friend* would be such a chicken."

"…Would pointing out that I'm still a minor and therefor technically not a grown man get me out of this situation?"

"If you mean to tell me you don't intend to overcome your predicament, and consequently prove to me you aren't a chicken, then by all means."

Hearing that, even I would have no choice but to buckle down. Kouta's run up had been less than a metre— and that was probably more than enough for me as well— but I took three, no, four steps back, followed by one more. I took a sharp breath in, and then took a final step for good measure.

"……"

New Genre: Sports-mystery.

"……Honestly, nonsense through and through,"

I mumbled and then began sprinting. I could make the jump without question. If all it took was jumping from the Fourth Ward to the fifth, then it would have been simple. The problem at hand was whether I could take off correctly. If I were to trip over the ledge, it would mean the end of the volume. Fearing that outcome, in the end, I took off a few dozen centimetres before the edge.

After the feeling of having been freed from gravity,

I felt the shock of its return with my whole body.

"—umph."

I touched down with both legs. In an almost squatting position, I found myself on the roof of the Fifth Ward. At the very least, the story hadn't ended with me miserably splattered across the ground like a bright red tomato or a split pomegranate.

*Clap, clap, clap*, the sound of Kouta's insincere applause. "Exemplary, my *dear friend*. Three whole metres. To leap that far with that kind of approach, hmm, it appears your athleticism may be consummate, after all."

"I did well in P.E. and academics, I'll have you know." I tried to look unaffected as I gradually calmed my beating heart. There was no need for me to put on airs, and I wasn't concerned with my pride or my image; I just figured it would be best not to show Kouta too much weakness. "So? Now that we're at the Fifth ward, what's next?"

"What's next, you say?"

"Yeah, as in what's the plan? The entrance to this building's under security too; nothing's changed. Granted, we did manage to get out of the Fourth Ward like you promised, but… that just means we're more likely to get caught if we're careless—"

Then, just as I turned to face Kouta-

The door directly ahead of me that lead to the research ward's interior slowly swung open, and, as if on cue and without any warning, Neo Furuara appeared. With his white lab coat clinging to his rotund body and a cigarette hanging from his lips, he made his way towards us as casually as could be.

In a panic, I began looking for a place to hide– a fool's errand on this wide-open rooftop– but a moment later I would learn that there was no need to hide in the first place.

Neo smiled cynically.

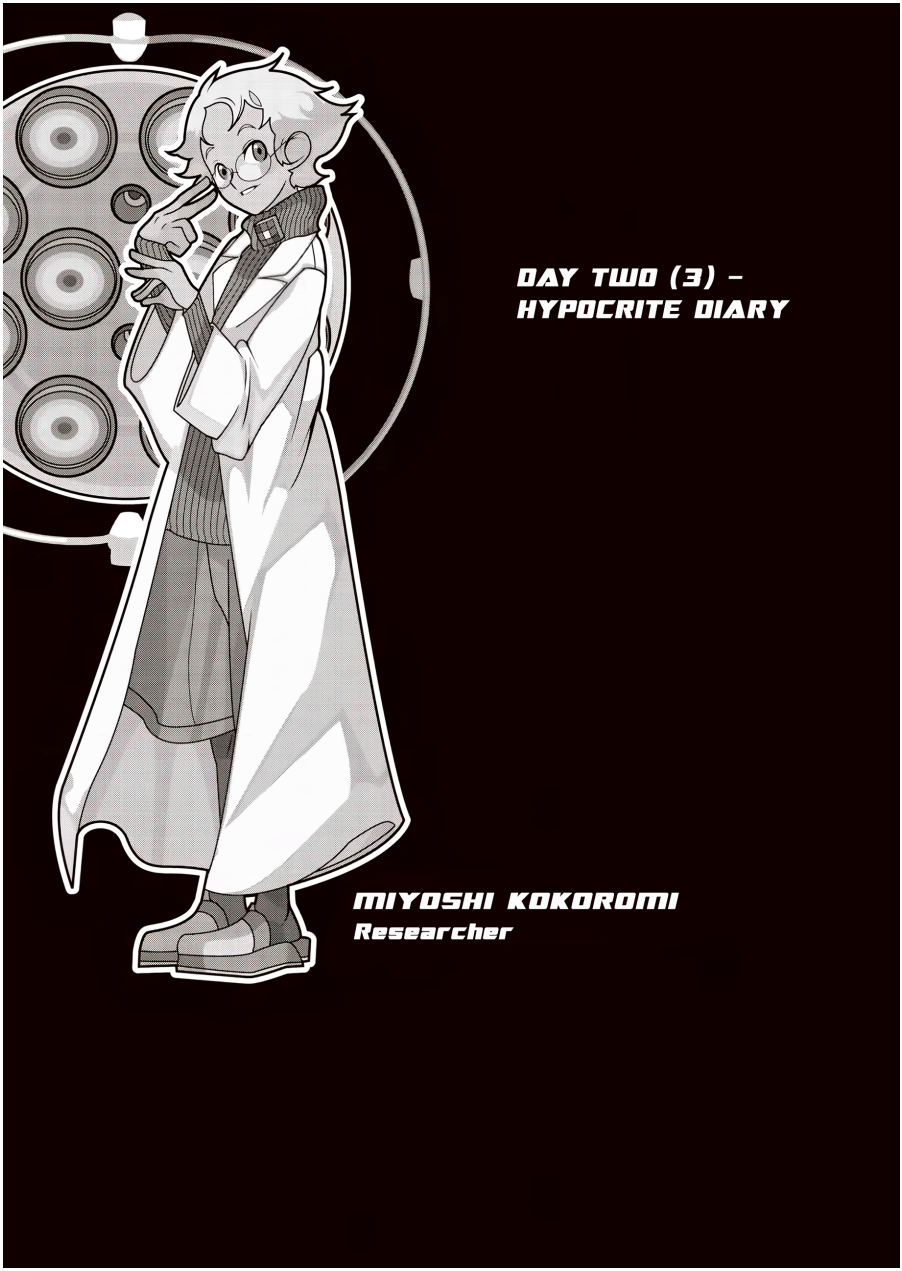
"Yo, Ishimaru,"

He said.

As for me, who was still supposed to be locked up underground, he only spared me a single glance before turning back to face Kouta, and, face to face with the woman he should have deemed an outsider and intruder, he bowed deeply.

"I had intended to greet you **here**, but things appear to be advancing much faster than I expected. I ask that you please pardon the late reception."

“Pay it no mind,” Kouta replied coolly. “More importantly, how about preparing something to drink for my *dear friend* here?”



# DAY TWO (3) – HYPOCRITE DIARY

MIYOSHI KOKOROMI
Researcher

## 0

*I believe in God.*

*Because we've met.*

## 1

It was to be expected.

How had Kouta managed to infiltrate such an impenetrable facility in the first place? What's more, how come Kouta, who the guards claimed '*had already fled the facility,'* was still soundly within its walls? There were countless questions raised by Kouta's presence. All of which could be answered by the existence of a **double-agent** somewhere within the facility, be it a member of security or otherwise. That much, I had predicted.

However, I never would have expected the double-agent to be one of the researchers.

As I drank the excessively sweet coffee that Neo made for me, I peered over at him. I had meant to do so in secret, but the ever-observant Neo noticed my gaze and chuckled.

"What's the matter?" Neo said with a condescending smirk. "Are you the type that doesn't drink coffee? If so, I also have tea. What I'd really like to recommend is some liquor, but well, it's probably best we don't dull your wits given what's coming."

"…I'm not good with liquor."

"Ah, Miyoshi did mention that, didn't she? Something about you being hospitalized after chugging an entire bottle of vodka, and how you haven't touched a drop of the stuff since."

My mentor sure loves to run her mouth, doesn't she?

"…It's fine, I like coffee. I prefer it black, but I love the sweet, canned stuff too. That said, I don't think coffee cares much about whether I like it or

not."

"Ha-ha, I know what you mean. It's rough when they don't like you back, ain't it?" Neo replied with a grin. "I can't stand black coffee. Not one bit. Anything spicy or bitter can disappear for all I care. If I ever start a religion, *'thou shalt not partake of the coffee bean'* will be one of my ten commandments."

"……"

The Fifth Ward's fourth floor. Neo Furuara's private quarters. It didn't really look like the room of an academic, if anything, when taking the appearance of the man himself into consideration, it felt more like the room of a mediaeval aristocrat. A wine cooler, an extravagant sofa, an intricately patterned wooden table, a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, and all four walls plastered with paintings. They weren't just any ordinary paintings either; they were exclusively the kind you could find hanging in a museum. They were re-creations of course, but it gave a glimpse into his refined tastes. "Hm? Have the paintings caught your eye?" Neo said. "I must admit, I'm somewhat ashamed by the lack of theme."

It was true. The paintings that adorned the walls held little relation to one another. From landscapes, portraits, and abstracts, to impressionism, cubism, and surrealism— there was even some automatism mixed in. There was a bit of everything. If he felt so inclined, he could probably turn this room into a miniature art exhibit.

"Do you like painting?"

"I do, although it seems painting doesn't care much for me," Neo said, looking just a little bit pleased. "My talent outstripped my passions, so to speak. That's a story from back when I was a student, however… a middle school student, no less. But yes, there was a time when I fancied myself a painter."

"I see." He probably meant 'my passions outstripped my talent,' but I didn't think there was much point in correcting such a simple mistake. "So, how'd it go?"

"Horrendously. It's one thing to admire paintings, but actually painting them is a different matter altogether. I was painting what was supposed to be a self-portrait when my art instructor came up and said, *'deary me, is this what I think it is? It is, isn't it? An abstract landscape. Well… it's certainly unique.'*"

"……" Having had a similar experience, I couldn't laugh. "…and that's why you switched to academia?"

"Ha-ha, no need to glare at me like that. That's the same glare you gave the professor earlier, isn't it? Talk about scary. Don't you get it? I'm an ally. See, I made you a coffee, didn't I?"

"An ally, huh?"

An ally to whom, exactly? That was the point of contention. At the very least, he wasn't an ally to the professor. That much was certain, but it would be naïve to conclude that that made him an ally of mine. Even calling him Kouta's ally would be questionable. Given what I saw of their exchange earlier, it didn't seem like their relationship was one built on trust. I took a sip of the coffee, savouring the taste for a moment before gulping it down. I felt it warm me up from within.

"Who are you, really?"

"Awfully straightforward, aren't you…? Heh, here's how I'd answer," Neo spread his arms wide and answered in his outdated fashion, "an expert informant! A professional backstabber! A specialist in secrecy! An immoral copycat! That is the man I, Neo Furuara, am!"

"……"

"Don't shrink away like that."

"Too late." I shrank back almost five kilometres. "So essentially, you and Kouta are co-conspirators sent by a rival organization to spy on the facility?"

"Not quite. Ishimaru and I aren't exactly partners in crime. I suppose we're more like accessories after the fact… It's hard to say." Neo made a difficult expression. "It's best if you don't ask too many questions about me. Knowing too much is liable to shorten your life expectancy, that's for sure. But well, isn't it enough that I'm not on the professor's side so I can lend you a hand like this?"

"……I suppose it is."

Neo's objective was likely very similar to Kouta's. However, unlike Kouta, who seemed motivated entirely by her own will, Neo seemed to belong to some kind of organization… an organization that stood opposed to this facility and its corporate backer, the Kunagisa House. Thanks to Neo's

meticulous preparation, he had somehow managed to infiltrate the facility as a member of faculty— meaning he was in for the long haul— Whereas Kouta's lack of meticulous preparation had left her more adaptable. That was the nature of their collaboration.

That said, Neo was right; I was better off pretending I knew nothing. At the very least, given how short I was on time, I didn't have the luxury of fussing over some company's research or potential profits.

"—Still… It seems you've gone and caught the eye of quite the troublesome individual."

"Troublesome individual? You mean Kouta?"

"Who else? Dangerous people seem to take a liking to you," Neo said self-effacingly. "Well, given your circumstances, I suppose there was no avoiding it this time around, but you're better off not having anything to do with Ishimaru when this is done. I don't have the slightest clue why Ishimaru is so intent on cooperating with you, but try and take this as a piece of sagely advice. Heh, what's the matter, you don't believe me? Sure, I admit it. Compared to how she used to be… compared to how she was when we first met, she's mellowed out considerably. Still, there was a time when that woman was known as *The Seventh Spear*…"

Given the way he talked about her, it seemed that this wasn't the only occasion where Neo and Kouta had worked together. In that case, just as Neo wasn't some run-of-the-mill informant, Kouta likely wasn't some run-of-the-mill corporate thief either. That whole mess was something I'd prefer to avoid, but at the same time, I wasn't sure I could afford to. Not while the possibility remained that it was related to Utsurigi's case.

"Putting that aside, what do you plan to do next?" In an instant, Neo's tone reverted to normal. "Frankly, this problem is in a class of its own. The professor's theory is absurd, but for the time being, it's the only thing that's been proposed that's actually possible. I can't say it's the best solution, but it doesn't look too bad at a glance. I probably don't need to tell you that the security system's your biggest roadblock. Key-card. Password. Retina scan. Voice Identification. ID Number. And finally, the logs sent to the mother computer. I'm sure you think it was one of us, but that's not especially believable either. I still suspect it's the work of an outsider. But if that's the case, they probably made their way down the mountain ages ago; solving it in the next four hours is going to be impossible."

"—It's unbecoming to try and frighten children."

By now, there should be no need to clarify whose voice it was. At some point, without either of us noticing, Kouta had appeared behind Neo, clutching a bundle of papers. She really lacked any and all presence. Neo must've grown accustomed to it because he didn't seem at all surprised. "Yo, Ishimaru. How long have you been standing there?" Neo asked without turning around.

"Since the part where you offered your sagely advice. We can take our time hashing out our difference of opinion regarding that later, Neo. But more pressingly, *dear friend*, take a gander at these,"

First, Kouta sat down next to Neo so she was facing me, then she handed me the bundle of papers she was holding. Written on them, I found lines and lines of mind-numbingly incomprehensible English letters and numbers. No, this wasn't English. This was programming, or in a broad sense, machine language.

"And these are…?"

"I printed them out on the off chance they prove useful. They're the logs from the mother computer." Kouta shot a quick glance at Neo. "…Neo's personal computer is rather sluggish, so it took more time than I would have liked. …Ah, there they are. These are the records from last night. The four-digit number indicates the time, and the code next to it correlates to the research ward."

As I listened to Kouta's explanation, I poured over the logs, but the only thing I ended up discovering was that the professor had been telling the truth. As previously claimed, last night, the only one to leave their research ward was Kasugai, and even in Kasugai's case, she only stepped outside for five to ten minutes. Going off these records, Professor Kyouichirou and his entire faculty all had alibis. Using the process of elimination, I had to admit that Kunagisa and crew were currently the most suspicious.

Things were looking grim.

Hmph.

Process of elimination, huh…?

"…Is it possible that they were tampered with?"

"Not a chance," The reply didn't come from Kouta, but Neo. "None of us have the skill. Not even the professor. Utsurigi might have been able to pull it off, but his area of expertise was different— his specialty was software,

not hardware— not to mention he was the one who was murdered. Miyoshi and Kasugai belong to an entirely different field, and if I had to say, Koutari's more suited to research than any kind of practical application. Ougaki and Uze are out of the question; not because they're talents are misplaced, but because they lack the level of talent required to begin with."

"—Even if that's true for everyone else, the professor could have done it, couldn't he? He's *The Mad Daemon*, after all. If his title isn't just for show, he should at least be able to manage that much, shouldn't he?"

"Let me be absolutely clear. Kunagisa Tomo is a genius. Shadou Kyouichirou **is not**. The difference between the two is much larger than you think, Loverboy."

"……"

"That's right, the professor's no genius. Of course, for someone of your level… or even mine, it's hard to see any difference between Lady Kunagisa and the professor at all. The two of them both look like geniuses in our eyes. The people who can actually tell the difference are **few and far between**. And the professor just so happens to be one of those **few**. But that's exactly why– having been forced to realize his own lack of genius– the professor changed course; going from his research on artificial intelligence to this **ridiculous** experiment is his way of making a statement, don't you think?"

Ridiculous experiment? That's exactly what this is. However, if that's really the case, then even without anything resembling an alibi, the professor would have had no reason to kill Utsurigi. There's no way he would ruin his own experiment, after all.

"That's just how people are, they love to look down on others. As we're all aware, the world isn't exactly fair, right? No matter who you ask, you'll get the same answer. I'm sure you've heard this thought experiment before, but suppose you asked someone, *'do you honestly believe that there's not a single person on Earth who's worse than you?'* you won't find a single person who would nod their head."

Neo seemed to be having fun.

There was no doubt he spoke the truth. There's just one person on top and countless people beneath them. That's just how the world works. That said, it wasn't a particularly nice thing to hear put into words.

"I suppose we've gotten off track. Still, that system's the black-box to

end all black-boxes if you ask me. And not just the security, I'm talking about the mother computer as well– One massive black-box. Its contents are known only to its creator, Lady Kunagisa, of course."

"…That means things are even more grim than I thought," I tossed the bundle of papers on the table. "…besides, when it comes to computers and the like, I've basically already given up. Those kinds of things aren't exactly my strong suit."

"Oh?" Neo looked somewhat amused. "Then what is? You're Miyoshi's pupil after all, so perhaps anatomy?"

"…I never really cared for anatomy… by the way, Neo," speaking of anatomy, "Utsurigi's crucified corpse, what happened to it?"

"Hm? Oh, exactly what you think happened to it. Ougaki and Uze carried it to Miyoshi's Third Ward… right about now, Kasugai and Miyoshi ought to be in the middle of performing an autopsy. Cause of death, time of death, that sort of thing."

"Is that so…?"

I gave it some thought. Information regarding Utsurigi's corpse. I definitely wanted to get my hands on that. I was so shocked by what I saw in that room this morning that I'd be pressed to say that I absorbed any details at all. Besides, it's not like I had gotten that close a look at it in the first place. And so, it was imperative that I got another look at Utsurigi's butchered, dismembered body.

One more thing. I absolutely couldn't ignore the crime scene. I needed to step foot in the room where Utsurigi was crucified once more; I needed to see it for myself. That grizzly scene adorned with that bloody message.

Those two things were absolutely essential, but how would I pull it off?

"First thing's first, *dear friend.* Is there not something the two of us have yet to discuss?" I was deep in thought when Kouta called out to me. "With regards to our partnership, is there not something we need to decide?"

"And what's that?"

"The question of who shall take precedence." Kouta raised a finger as if lecturing me. "In other words, shall you offer up your **information** first, or

shall I assist you with your search for the truth and rely on your good-will after the fact? The matter of order is also a matter of sincerity."

"Ahh…" That's right, isn't it? "That certainly is a problem…"

Of course, I would have preferred to exchange information after. Not because I was worried about the time limit, but because it was the only trump card I held against Kouta. And Kouta was in the same boat. Even if she were to generously provide her assistance, there was no guarantee I would return the favour. Especially since I'd already shot down her invitation last night. For Kouta to place her full trust in me would have been far too reckless.

Kouta seemed to be thinking something similar as she stared at me in silence.

"How about you flip a coin for it?" Neo suggested. "Every second you waste only worsens your chances, Ishimaru. It doesn't do the lad any favours either. It's not like you're going to find a perfect solution anyhow, so why not settle it with a coin flip? It's only fair, isn't it?"

"—Very well. 'Tis consummate," Kouta said, then she reached into her coat pocket and pulled out something resembling a medal. I knew it wasn't Japanese yen at least, but at the same time, I couldn't place its origins. There's always the off chance that it was a token she'd won at a game centre.

"Well then, *dear friend,* heads or tails? Please call it."

"You can hardly call that fair," I said cautiously. "The one who tosses it controls which face it lands on, don't they? I'm not saying that I don't trust you— No, I guess I am– but I'm not leaving everything up to a method that can be rigged by anyone with decent hand-eye coordination…"

"Certainly," Kouta readily conceded. "Then I'm content with you being the one to toss it, and I being the one to call it. You'd deem that fair, would you not?"

"…Are you sure? Then I'd be the one able to rig it."

"I have another coin." Kouta said as she reached into her pocket and procured the second coin. "If I'm holding it in my right hand, then it's heads. If it's in my left, then it's tails. Do you find that agreeable?"

She said, tossing the coin into the air. As both her arms swiftly crossed in front of her, the coin wound up in one of her hands. Which hand that might be, I had no idea.

"…Sounds good to me."

I lightly tossed the coin. At this point, no strategy remained; it all boiled down to luck. Without catching the coin in my palm, I let it fall onto the table however it may. It bounced a few times, spun, and then finally came to rest facing tails-side up.

Pascal wagers fifty-fifty.

I suppose if I want to be precise, there's always the chance the coin could've landed on its side, so it wasn't exactly fifty-fifty, but the chances of that happening were ridiculously slim. Besides, the outcome had already been decided. I turned to look at Kouta. She wore a somewhat cynical smile, then she ever-so-slowly opened her left hand. Gripped in her palm– was nothing at all.

"……Very well. This, too, is consummate. You shall take priority." Kouta lifted herself off the sofa and gazed down at me. "Well then, cases like these need to be resolved step-by-step. Let us acquire the autopsy report and examine the crime scene. Which should come first, Utsurigi's corpse, or the crime scene? Please come to a decision."

Returning Kouta's gaze, I gave my answer.

"…Let's see. For the time being, let's start with— yeah, let's start with the corpse. The more time passes, the less information we'll be able to get from the examination." I turned to Neo. "Neo. Do you know which room in the Third Ward they're keeping Utsurigi's body in?"

"It's likely in the Seventh Examination Room on the third floor. They said as much. But what are you planning on doing?" Neo tilted his head a little. "You… or rather, you and Kouta have no means of entering the Third Ward, do you? Just like you had no means of entering the Seventh Ward. I can shelter you here like this, I can offer suggestions as you deliberate, I can offer information, heck, I can even offer you coffee. However, any further collusion would be far too risky. I'm not in the best of positions either at the moment. You understand that, right?"

"…Sure, I get that, but…"

How would we? The first thing that came to mind was seeking my teacher's help. However, even if we ignore the obvious risks, I couldn't say the chance of success was all that high to begin with. It was the worst type of gamble. There's no one in heaven or on Earth more self-centred than my teacher, Miyoshi Kokoromi; it's not like her loyalty to Professor Kyouichirou

ran especially deep, but in the same breath, I couldn't see her betraying him either. There's no way someone as keen and attentive as my teacher was just another hire. She had to be here for some personal reason. For that instructor, who couldn't even conceive of a life not lived in pursuit of her own goals, the ability to put something ahead of her own aims didn't have even a whit of existence. So the thought of her valuing something as trite as a former pupil over herself was beyond optimistic.

"…In that case, we only have one option."

Kouta addressed me while I was still lost in thought. Without waiting for my response, she turned back to Neo. "In the meantime," she said, "please run interference on the professor. Create as many distractions and feed them as much false information as possible. Stir up some wanton chaos and send them scrambling. That is your specialty, is it not?"

"……Ha-ha-ha," Neo responded with a fake laugh. "I read you loud and clear, Ishimaru Kouta. I don't know what it is, but I'm sure you have your reasons for being so buddy-buddy with the lad. What kind of **information** could you possibly want that bad, I wonder? Don't worry, I won't ask. I'm dying to know, but it's best if I don't. Alright. Leave it to me, Ishimaru. Your humble servant, Neo Furuara, will do what little he can to help."

"Consummate. Then let us be off, *dear friend.*" Neo's words elicited an uncharacteristically wide smile from Kouta, then she took my hand and helped me off the sofa.

"'Tis time to set out on your adventure."

"…You're awfully carefree."

"Because I'm not the one in peril. For the moment, at least."

"Lad," as I was being forcefully dragged away, Neo called out to me in a somewhat serious tone. "Take care not to run into anyone. If anyone spots you, you're finished. If you think Miyoshi would let it slide because you're old friends, or that you'll be able to trick someone like Ougaki into working with you, you're being far too naïve."

"Trust me, I'm well aware."

"It's not just the professor. All the folks here are hopelessly depraved. Myself included, of course. Speaking of, be especially wary of Kasugai."

"…Kasugai?" I hadn't expected that. "How come? I would've

thought the ones to watch out for would be Shito or Misachi…"

If the two of them could maintain their faith in the professor even after being subject to such unjust violence, then that makes them extremely dangerous individuals.

"In this case, it's those without conviction who are more trouble. Just think about it. Why did Professor Kyouichirou entrust you— or rather Kunagisa— to Kasugai instead of keeping her in his own ward? Part of it is clearly so he can shirk responsibility if it ever comes down to it. However, there's another reason that's far more important: the **objective** fact that Kasugai would **never** betray him. As a professional backstabber, and as someone who always aims to betray, I can assure you— I can say this wholeheartedly— Kasugai will not betray him. They were never **allies** to begin with. Ougaki and Uze have their own reasons for looking up to the professor. Be it respect, or gratitude, or what have you. That's why, so long as you can offer them something **greater**, you're golden. You could strike while they're still reeling from the shock of their beating at the professor's hands, for instance. There's a myriad of ways to get someone to turn coat. But Kasugai is different. She's here ***just because***."

"Just because…?"

When I fed his line back to him, Neo sneered.

"That's right. Could you imagine anything scarier, anything more frightening, than someone who acts without reason or conviction? She doesn't have a single reason to obey the professor. Not one. She's here just because. And that's why there's no way to shake her. She has no reason to cooperate with the professor, so there's no logic that could move her. Multiply anything with zero, and you wind up with zero, but dividing by zero is outright impossible. What would you call that, if not blind fanaticism?"

"……"

Kasugai Kasuga.

I recalled the conversation we had the night before.

The woman who chose *not to choose*.

The woman who had neither likes, dislikes, or indifference, who found nothing pleasant, unpleasant, or disinteresting.

The woman who had nothing.

The woman who was nothing, *just because.*

That said, in the moment, I didn't truly grasp what Neo was trying to say. I was well aware that Kasugai was twisted in some way, but I couldn't imagine her being as dangerous as Neo claimed. If anyone was to be labelled a fanatic, then Shito or Misachi still seemed far more fitting. What's more, whatever sense of fear I was supposed to feel regarding a phrase as dubious as *'just because'* was lost on me.

Kasugai Kasuga, *just because*.

That didn't sound like much of a problem, right?

——However, a few hours later, I would come to understand. There exists those without a shred of conviction, who inspire terror through their presence alone. I would be made painfully aware that there is no solution for someone who isn't a problem.

## 2

And so, Kouta and I returned to the Fourth Ward's roof once more.

"……What now?"

"That's obvious. You wish to go to the Third Ward, do you not? If so, your route is right there. Your one-and-only, second-to-none route."

I looked in the direction Kouta was pointing, but I found nothing but thin air. The space between the fourth and third wards. At a glance, the gap was around four metres… three and a half at best. Nearly a metre… no, over a metre wider than the distance between the fourth and fifth wards.

"…You're asking me to jump? Again?"

"'Tis consummate should you find it objectionable. If this is where you wish your game to end, then I shan't force you."

"……"

I peered over the edge and looked down. Yup, no matter how many times I check, the drop's still over ten metres. Both my eyes have 20/20 vision, so I'm confident in my assessment. It's only in moments like these that I curse my healthy body.

"That's three and a half metres, you know…?"

"Even middle school girls can jump that far nowadays," Kouta said lightly. "'Tis said that any elementary schooler with even a moderately competent upbringing should be able to jump four. Incidentally, the current long jump world record for men is eight metres and ninety-five centimetres, and for women, 'tis seven metres and fifty centimetres. 'Tis not even half of the woman's record. Surely you can manage that much, can't you?"

She could at least spare me the comparison to the world record holders. And even in their case, while they may have *spent* their lives long jumping, they surely never *risked* their lives long jumping. The risk of certain death should I fail, or at least very least, the risk of grievous bodily injury, weighed heavier than you might think.

“I don’t think it’s wise to linger in one spot. Utsurigi’s corpse shan’t remain in the Third Ward forever. Once they gather enough evidence— enough evidence to suit the professor’s purposes, that is— I wouldn’t think it unlikely that they dispose of the corpse by burning it. Should that happen, you’d be finished. No, I suppose the one who’d be finished would be Kunagisa, would it not? A *Dead End*, so to speak.”

Hearing that name spoken left me with no choice. “Good grief,” I muttered under my breath as I took my starting position facing the roof’s edge. This time, out of an abundance of caution, I gave myself nearly double the distance for my run-up. That said, if the run-up was too long, it’s possible that my stamina might flag before I even made the jump, so I had to be careful.

“—forget me, can *you* make this jump, Kouta?”

“Piece of cake.”

Bursting with confidence, Kouta laughed and pushed up her glasses. Her attitude suggested that it was likely just as easy for her as she made it sound. In that case, the only one I should be worrying about is myself. It’d be alright– so long as I built up enough momentum, there’s no reason I shouldn’t be able to leap three and a half metres. As long as I was careful not getting my foot snagged on the eavestrough——

I steadied my breathing and stepped forward. My seventh step took me right to the ledge, and my eighth launched me forwards. I arched my body like a bow— and with a view of the sky— for but a moment, I soared through the air, and then, I landed. I had made it across.

“—phew,”

I turned to look behind me at the roof of the Fourth Ward where I had been standing just a moment ago, but by the time I’d turned around, Kouta was already in the air. Before I could recognise what I was looking at, she had already touched down on the roof of the Third Ward; her excess momentum carried her forward as she skid on the heels of her high-laced boots, bringing herself to a halt.

“Oh-ho,” still leaning back somewhat, Kouta smiled at me. “We might make a better couple than once thought, you and I. ‘Tis likely we are the only pair in the whole wide world enjoying such acrobatics together.”

“I wouldn’t exactly say I’m enjoying this…”

I said, noticing that I had landed closer to the roof's edge than Kouta had. She wasn't as tall as Suzunashi, but Kouta was still tall for a woman, and, with her legs being longer than mine, she likely had an advantage when it came to long jumping, but still, rather than her stature, the difference in our performance likely boiled down to a simple difference in athleticism.

"What's the matter? We ought to hurry. We've not much time, now do we?"

"Ah, right…" At that moment, I realized something else which stopped me in my tracks. "Kouta. Forgive me if I'm wrong, but… if someone were to use this method… leaping from roof to roof like this… wouldn't they be able to infiltrate the Seventh Ward?"

Kouta looked surprised for just a moment, but she quickly brushed it off. "I don't think that would be possible." While it might not have been an instant rejection, I didn't understand how Kouta could dismiss my suggestion so off-handedly, so I may have been overly demanding when I asked, "and why is that?"

"Try not to get so worked up, it's unsightly. Were you like this when you snapped at Professor Kyouichirou?"

"That's… No, you're right. That was rude of me, I apologize."

I bowed my head.

Right. What good does getting worked up do me? Even if every passing moment we wasted like this further endangered Kunagisa and Suzunashi, it's not like getting hot-headed about it would solve anything. If anything, it was the opposite. It's moments like this, situations like this, where I had to forcefully compose myself. Like always, I'd smother all emotion and think like a machine. A tin-man without a heart.

"Still, how could you just brush it aside…"

"You think I haven't considered it? We're currently leaping from roof to roof like Lupin the Third, do you think I've lived the kind of life where such an idea is in any way novel?" As she spoke, she turned her back to me and headed towards the door. "Regardless, I don't think you'd be able to pull it off. I'll explain my reasoning later. For the moment, we ought to be focused on examining Utsurigi's corpse, should we not?"

"……Understood," I nodded reluctantly and followed after Kouta. "Still, if that method's impossible, then…"

At long last, I felt like I had glimpsed a crack in this confounding case, but I guess it had just been my imagination. An imaginary route into the impenetrable locked-room that was the Seventh ward.

As Kouta unlocked the door, she said, "'Tis not as if that locked room is your only concern, now is it? There's still the reason Utsurigi was so horrifically slaughtered. Or the matter of the curious bloody message scrawled on the wall. If you let your reasoning get tied up on a single issue, you'll miss what's right under your nose."

"…Is that right? I suppose you have a point."

I checked my watch. Roughly three and a half hours remained. While you could hardly call that a surplus of time, the problems weighing on my mind were in overwhelming abundance. To be blunt, I can't say I had much hope. But so long as even a sliver remained, I had no choice but to push onwards. It was pointless to even think about.

As I continued descending the stairs after Kouta, once again, I noticed something. It had nothing to do with the case, but rather to do with the gamble I'd made with Kouta a little while ago. Heads or tails. It had ended with my victory, but had I truly won? Kouta's left hand had been unmistakably empty. However, whether the coin had actually been in her right hand was something I never confirmed. One could hazard a guess that— just maybe— both hands had been empty. The idea that, out of concern for my lack of time, Kouta had willingly surrendered her advantage to me was so implausibly sentimental, that I couldn't bring myself to broach the subject. Instead, I called out to Kouta as she walked ahead of me and asked something completely unrelated. "So, what does Neo actually do?"

"Did he not tell you himself?"

"I caught the gist, but he does a remarkable job at being evasive. No, I suppose it was more like he was meandering… He called himself an expert informant, a professional backstabber, a specialist in secrecy, and an immoral copycat— just a bunch of bullshit sounding titles."

"And, what would you say he is?"

"…Well, I figured he was just a spy for a rival organization."

"That's hardly a consummate answer. 'Tis the same as declaring 'everything that swims in the ocean is a fish.' Let's see, your answer scores three or four tenths of a consummate at most."

"Is that right?" I didn't quite understand her rubric. "Then what is he?"

"Keep this between the two of us, alright?" Kouta halted her descent for a moment, brought her index finger to her lips, and winked. "Neo's not something so frivolous as a spy. In fact, far from being fabrications, his self-proclaimed monikers suit him to a T. He's far more like an ambassador dispatched by a certain substantial organization… no, a substantial circuit, and that places him several ranks higher than a mere spy."

"…This circuit sounds like a big deal."

"That just goes to show how much attention it's garnered. The research Professor Kyouichirou's performing, that is… Or I suppose, given Utsurigi's passing, I should say *'the research he **was** performing.'* But then again, if they continue their research with Kunagisa as their lab rat, then I needn't have bothered with the correction. But that all depends on your efforts, now doesn't it? You know, even your former compatriots, the ER3 System, must be itching to get their hands on the results of Professor Kyouichirou's experiments. Of course they would."

"…And the same goes for you, I take it?"

Kouta's gentle smile seemed to say, *'precisely,'* then she resumed walking. I decided to put off any further questioning for now and followed after her. I passed by the entrance to the fourth floor and made my way down to the third. Kouta was waiting for me in front of the door, and then, careful not to make any noise, she used her knife to pick the lock.

"Which room did they say it was again?"

"The Seventh Examination Room,"

As Kouta spoke, she gripped the knob to the metal iron door, carefully pushed it open a crack, and peered inside. However, no sooner had she done so than she pulled the door shut again. Despite being a spontaneous reflex, to her credit, the only noise that was made was the sound of the automatic locking mechanism.

"What's the matter?"

"This is far from consummate. I'm afraid two women just stepped out of the examination room in question."

"Two women? What do they look like?"

"The two of them are both wearing lab coats. One is donning a pair of round spectacles, and the other appears to me like the aloof type."

In that case, we were most definitely talking about Miss Kokoromi and Kasugai. When it came to women, there was also Misachi, but given the intel we got from Neo and the fact that they were wearing lab coats, it's probably safe to count her out.

Kouta crouched where she was standing and pressed her ear up against the door. I didn't think it'd accomplish much, but I followed suit.

"… ……Y'see …… "

"… ……Just the worst …… … "

"…is……hard work……ain't it"

"The usual …… …… a pain in the… "

I couldn't hear too well, the two of them must've been quite far away. However, their voices gradually grew clearer, which meant they were probably getting closer.

"Still, whatever the case, what's the professor fixin' on doing with the three of 'em?"

Miss Kokoromi's voice.

"I should think the answer would be obvious by now."

Kasugai's voice.

In other words, I'd been right about who Kouta spotted. Kouta and I, still crouching facing each other, exchanged a brief look. Kouta gave a small nod before turning her ear back to their conversation.

"He's as boorish as ever. Don't you think? It hardly feels like the actions of a learned man. It's wretched enough to lock children up underground like this but to frame them for murder? He must be out of his mind."

"That's a mighty sensible opinion. Well, I reckon that's why they call him *The Mad Daemon*. Still, it ain't as if I don't get where he's comin' from. After all, shit hit the fan immediately after the three of 'em showed up, right? Even without all that theorizing, ya can't help but be suspicious, now can ya?"

"It's unlike you to be so unreasonable. Your former pupil's among the things locked up in my underground kennel you know?"

Kasugai spoke about people as if they were objects.

"I should think you would want to stand up for him would you not? After all when he blew his top you were the first to rush to stop him."

"Ahh, y'see, that was just 'cause I saw it comin'. That kid used to lose his temper all the time abroad as well. He's usually mild-mannered, but if ya so much as touch a sore spot, he throws a hissy fit. Folk who dedicate themselves to academia— or just smart folk in general— are all kinda like that, but that kid's a tad different. At any rate, he's always had a short fuse. 'Specially in his first year. I was always the one who had to come and break it up. He was a real handful, I tell you what."

I had plenty I wanted to say, but I held my tongue.

"Still, I reckon that's what made him so gosh darn cute."

"Really? I'm somewhat put off by it."

"Is that right? What's the matter, Kasugai, are hot-blooded men no good?"

"No good at all."

"You've got some mighty strict standards, don'tcha, Kasugai. Still, I gotta agree with ya, that kid is absolutely no good." Miss Kokoromi had no issues saying terrible things about someone when she thought she was doing so behind their back. She continued. "That said, he's not no good in your usual way. Sure, he's fundamentally no good, but he's no good in practice either; even his prospects ain't no good— that kid sure don't half-ass it when it comes to being no good. He's the first-and-last, unprecedented, undefeated, trailblazer when it comes to being a no-good bastard. Not that I'm trying to sing his praises or anything."

Don't worry, no one's going to get that impression.

"So you're saying there's nothing to worry about, Miyoshi?"

"Well, *I'm* certainly not worried. If anything, I'm giddy with anticipation. All we gotta do is sit tight. The professor, Shito, and Uze will spend the next couple hours tryna come up with some way to fix this mess, but by then, I dare say the kid'll have this whole thing figured out."

"He'll figure it out? Him?"

"Damn straight. When it comes to situations like this, there's no one better suited for the job. No, I s'ppose it's better to say these kindsa situations are best suited for him. To put it another way, situations like these are his natural enemy. He'll get himself all riled up and put this whole thing to rest."

"He is your pupil after all."

"Sure is tempting to think about it that way, but I'm 'fraid that don't got much to do with it."

Miss Kokoromi dismissed the idea with a laugh.

…Come to think of it, the voices were neither approaching nor getting further away. The two of them must have stopped. Just what were they doing? I couldn't think of a suitable reason for the two of them to stop and chat right in front of the emergency exit, so could it be that they realized we were here? No, if they had, they would've immediately swung the door open instead of wasting time on pointless chit-chat. The fact that they hadn't proved we still remained unnoticed.

That's when I remembered. When we went to visit the still-living Utsurigi in the Seventh ward yesterday, the elevator (that Shito claimed Utsurigi had torn apart) was right next to the stairwell. If the Third Ward had the same layout, then the elevator shaft should be located right next to this door. In other words, Miss Kokoromi and Kasugai weren't posted up outside, but simply waiting for the elevator nearby.

If so, this was our chance. The two of them would soon leave the floor. Suddenly, sneaking into the examination room that housed Utsurigi's corpse was looking a lot easier.

Huh, things were starting to look up. This might just be my year— if it weren't for the fact it was already early July. That, and the countless times I'd nearly been murdered these past six months.

"Even with that said he's currently locked away in a cage back at my place. Whether he's perfectly suited or a natural enemy or what have you there's nothing he can do. Or are you saying he's the kind of armchair detective who could solve it without budging an inch?"

"If anything, he's more of a backwards thinker. When he's in the thick of it, he's the kind of dunce who's all, '*I don't get it. I don't get it. I have no clue what's going on. I have so little clue what's happening that if*

*even one more thing pops up that I don't get, I'll drop dead. This case is killing me,*' but then the most trivial of clues will have him saying, '*that's it! I solved it! How did I not realize something so simple sooner!? Am I an idiot or what? I'm so dumb that it's killing me!*'"

"So it kills him either way?"

It seems like it killed me either way.

"So no, he ain't the armchair type. He ain't the remote operation type or a close-range powerhouse either, so now that I think about it, I s'ppose you're right. So long as he's locked up there ain't nothing he can do."

"In that case he's more of the electric chair type. I suppose all your anticipation was for naught then." Kasugai's words were frigid, blunt, and without a hint of tenderness. "Still that's not something for us to be worrying about. We ought to leave everything to the professor."

"That again? It's like your catchphrase or something. '*Leave everything to the professor.'*… Not that I hate that side of ya, or anything."

"Exactly which side of me are you referring to Miyoshi?"

"The side of ya that can't stomach thinkin' 'bout stuff on your own, so ya pawn it off on others. The side that can never come to a decision."

I heard Miss Kokoromi laugh, but Kasugai didn't say a word.

I remembered Neo's words of advice, so I strained my ears to listen even closer, but in the end, they never said anything particularly important. It was all idle and worthless conversation. Such as:

"Ya know the game Kokkuri? I get that the '*ko*' is written with the character for 'fox', and '*ri*' is written as 'tanuki', but what's the '*ku*' s'pposta be?"

"Dog if I'm not mistaken."

"Howd'ya read 'dog' as '*ku*'?"

"Different kanji. Just like how 'snake' is written differently when part of the Chinese zodiac."

"I see… still, a dog feels like an odd choice compared to a fox or a tanuki, don'tcha think?"

"They're all animals that live in the mountains."

"Then it could just as well've been a monkey…"

Or:

"Y'know how you often hear people say, 'I could care less'? If ya think about it, ain't it s'pposta be 'I couldn't care less'?"

"Indeed it would be quite strange to admit that you could care less. I suppose it's one of those eggcorn things where people misremember or mishear a saying."

"Hmph, in other words it's just like how we got 'A Catcher in the Rye'."

"Speaking of which when I was still an intern I had a friend who'd studied abroad and they insisted '*the Japanese translation is all wrong! This isn't what Sallinger meant at all! I'm the only one who understands him! I'll retranslate the whole thing from scratch for Sallinger's sake.'* Then he penned a book titled '*Catch them in the Rye!'*."

"Was it any good?"

"It was awful."

And so their conversation went. Come to think of it, the two of them sounded far more passionate during their idle chatter than they had while discussing the case.

The elevator arrived, and I faintly heard the sound of the doors opening.

"Well then I'll be off Miyoshi."

"Yeah. What's Neo want with you anyhow?"

"He insists that there's some urgent problem with the model skeleton he's working on but that sounds like a bald-faced lie. Still it's not as though I can outright reject a request from a senior. Even though I'd much rather head back to my research ward as soon as possible."

"I see. Neo, huh? …I'm sure it's fine. Catch ya later."

I heard the sound of the elevator door closing followed by the hum of an electric motor.

Taking that as our cue, I stood up, but Kouta didn't follow. She remained frozen with her ear pressed up against the door and a serious expression on her face, as if still listening to Miss Kokoromi and Kasugai's conversation.

"…Kouta? What are you doing?" I asked quietly. "Neo's risking a lot to buy us this window… do you hear something?"

"I don't hear anything?"

"…Then what're you doing?"

"I don't hear anything, *dear friend,"* Kouta repeated in a whisper. "Why do you suppose that is? Going off that conversation just now, Kasugai boarded that elevator alone. Miyoshi should still be on this floor. And yet, I don't hear a thing. Do you not find that strange?"

After having it explained to me, I finally understood. She heard nothing. It's not that she simply couldn't hear their conversation anymore, she heard **absolutely nothing**, not even a single **footstep**. In other words, despite Kasugai leaving, Miss Kokoromi hadn't taken a single step from where she stood. She had no reason to still be here, so why was she lingering?

Why?

"It's high time you came on out, don'tcha think?"

Miss Kokoromi called out in a voice loud enough that even I, with my face no longer pressed against the door, could hear her clearly. Even Kouta seemed shocked by the sudden exclamation and naturally recoiled away from the door.

"It's not very manly to scamper around and hide, kiddo!"

"I feel like I've heard that line somewhere before,"

Kouta narrowed her eyes and shot me a sarcastic glance. Having who I'd stolen that line from exposed like this was so embarrassing that I couldn't meet her gaze.

Does this mean… she noticed us? Had she seen right through us from the beginning? Had she carried on that conversation with Kasugai knowing that this single door was all that separated us? —No, that couldn't be. After all, Miss Kokoromi wasn't superhuman enough to pull a stunt like that through an insulated iron door. She wasn't three years ago, at least.

“Not gonna show yourself? Fine, no skin off my nose. I’ll just report this to the professor, then. If I ring him up, he’s sure to come runnin’, don’tcha think? He’ll race on over like a bat out of hell. If that happened, even a pupil of mine would find themselves in quite the pickle.”

Kouta gave me a look that said, *‘what should we do?’* Unable to avoid her gaze forever, I reluctantly said, “We don’t have a choice.” Damnit, even if it was just for a moment, I was stupid for believing anything like ‘good luck’ would ever come into my life.

“You should head on back to Neo’s place.”

“Are you going out there?” Kouta’s brow slightly furrowed. “It shan’t end well for you.”

“Things could hardly get much worse.”

This was the second time I said that exact line to Kouta. The rate at which things had been getting worse was accelerating exponentially.

“Teeeenn! Niiiiiiine! Eeiiiight! Seeeevvennn!”

Miss Kokoromi began loudly counting down. It was like she was excitedly welcoming in the turn of the millennium. It was something I thought about a lot during my time abroad, but Miss Kokoromi had some crazy pipes. She really ought to dissect her own throat.

“Siiiiiiiix! Fiiiiiiiive! Foouuuuur! Threeeeee!”

“Kouta, if I’m not back in the next half-an-hour—”

“I understand.” Kouta nodded before I could finish. “Although, in that case, our contract would be void, so I shan’t guarantee anything. I wouldn’t be against making another contract with Miss Kunagisa, however. Still, for the time being, you have my word.”

“I see. The wonderful thing about giving your word is that it doesn't matter when you break it.”

“You say some outrageous things.”

With that, Kouta held her knife out to me and asked, “you know how to use it?”

“Yeah, I’ve used one before actually.”

“How consummate. With that, I bid you adieu.”

When I took the knife, Kouta quickly made her way up the staircase. Once I was sure I could no longer see her, I inserted the blade into the key-hole and jimmied it two or three times. Before long, I heard the door unlock.

I gripped the knob, pulled the door open, and stepped through.

“Twooo! Ooone!  Zerooo! Negative O—”

“Why’re you still counting?”

“Oh-ho?”

When Miss Kokoromi spotted me, she stopped shouting.

“—Wouldya look at that. You were really here after all. Well, I’ll be damned.”

“……” So this bastard really was bluffing. “Hello, Miss.”

“Why hello. …Say, that reminds me, the last time the two of us were alone like this was back in that hospital room, ain’t that right, kiddo?”

Miss Kokoromi adjusted the frame of her glasses before treating me to a mischievous smile. Mischievous might not be the right word; the word I was likely looking for was cruel. I got the distinct impression that this was the kind of expression a cat might make as it torments a mouse— that kind of smile.

It was probably an expression that only a prepubescent girl could get away with.

Like Kunagisa Tomo, for example.

“…Haha” Seemingly unable to hold it in anymore, Miss Kokoromi burst into laughter. “Hahaha! Hahahaha……hahaha! Fantastic, Kiddo! Simply, fantastic! You’re one fascinatin’ character, I tell ya what! If only ya were just a touch smarter, things woulda turned out much better for ya… that, or a touch stupider, I s’ppose.”

“Miss, I have a request.”

“Hmm?” Miss Kokoromi made a show of tilting her head. “…Look at you, being all honest. That’s twice now you've surprised me.”

“Can you keep the fact you saw me to yourself?”

“Sure thing,” she nodded readily. “Don’t go askin’ something so cold. We’re pals, ain’t we, kiddo?”

“……”

I had no choice but to be cautious. Normally, this would be the moment when I could let down my guard. The moment where I’d let out a sigh of relief and give my earnest thanks. Even I can manage that much courtesy. I might even be moved by her warm words of affection. However, this was none other than the infamous Miss Miyoshi Kokoromi I was dealing with.

I wasn’t fool enough to think things would play out that way.

“One—”

Making no attempt at consideration towards how I was feeling, Kokoromi began almost monologuing to herself. She folded her arms as if deep in thought, occasionally glancing my way.

“…No, two. There's at least two.”

“……?”

“Three would be perfect… but that don’t seem like the case. If it were, ya wouldn’t be meandering around a place like this. Then again, I s’ppose too many would be a problem as well.”

“What are you talking about, Miss.”

“What’s that? Why, how many collaborators ya have in the facility, of course.” Miss Kokoromi brought her hands up and made the shape of a fox as if she were making shadow puppets. “Ya’d need at least one to spring ya from your cage. It sure ain’t Kasugai… so who is it, I wonder? But that alone wouldn’t cut it… that’s why there’s gotta be two.”

“…I’d like to compliment you on your perceptiveness, but, as usual, you’re dead wrong, Miss.” I put up a bold front. “I did everything on my own. I actually have superpowers.”

“First I’m hearing of it.”

“You’re the first person I’ve told, Miss. I assume you can keep that a

secret, too?"

"Fine then. Since ya clearly don't wanna talk about it, I won't pry. For now, at least."

With a swish of her lab coat, Miss Kokoromi turned her back to me and began walking. Looks like I hadn't fooled her. Roughly five steps ahead of me, she stopped. "Come along then," she said. "You're here to pay your respects to Utsurigi, ain'tcha, Kiddo?"

"……"

"No need to be so cautious. It ain't like we're strangers, or nothin'"

"I'd be less cautious if we were…"

"As witty as ever, haha!"

Seemingly unbothered by my sarcastic response, she just kept on walking. That said, Miss Kokoromi is quite short which left her with a narrow stride, so even my trepidatious footsteps managed to keep adequate pace. Miss Kokoromi's stature could give Kunagisa a run for her money, so compared to Suzunashi, she'd look less like a kid next to an adult, and more like a dwarf next to a giant. But this wasn't the time to be thinking such things.

Miss Kokoromi stopped in front of a door marked with a plate that read 'SEVENTH EXAMINATION ROOM' in all-caps for some reason (although the writing was so messy that it was almost indecipherable. This plate was clearly either the result of a first-grade arts and crafts class, or Miss Kokoromi), and turned to face me. "By the way," she said,

"What is genius in the first place?"

"……A difficult question. Let's see, to answer that, we'd first need to think about what that word even means."

"Who are ya? Descartes?" Miss Kokoromi answered with a philosophy-based quip. "Besides, there ain't no such thing as a difficult question. Only difficult answers, don'tcha agree?"

"I've heard that saying a lot."

"I bet ya have! Then again, that's probably got to do with the law of large numbers. *'Talent isn't something you nurture, but something you're*

*born with'*— that's a quote from Fraulein Love, but don'tcha find it fitting? As Kunagisa Tomo's lover, can'tcha see where she's comin' from?" Then Miss Kokoromi narrowed her eyes at me. "—Haha, so the girl you kept yapping about back in Houston was her, wasn't it? Ah well, it's not like you matter anyhow. So, what's your answer?"

"I wouldn't know." Unable to understand why she was asking, I responded to Miss Kokoromi's question with a resounding non-answer. "A genius is essentially just someone really smart or skilled, isn't it? I think that's probably good enough."

"Probably?"

"If you're not happy with my answer, then fine, 'it *is* good enough'. I'm not a genius in the first place, so it's not my place to try and define it."

"Or so you think, but for geniuses— whether it be Kunagisa, the professor, Utsurigi, or whoever— genius is normal. To them, a definition ain't worth squat."

"What're you even trying to say?"

"Nonsense, your favourite." Turning the knob, Miss Kokoromi pushed open the door. "Now then, welcome to my castle."

The room's interior was dimly lit— scratch that, it was pitch black. There weren't any windows, so not even a ray of light entered the room. Miss Kokoromi stepped inside without even turning on the lights. I had no idea where the light switch was, so I just followed after her, careful to mind my feet. The dim glow from out in the hall was of some help, but for some reason or other (perhaps the result of a simple loose hinge) the door swung shut on its own, plunging the room into complete darkness. Everything disappeared from view, even my own hands.

"Hang on— Miss? Miss? Where are you?"

No response. But I could still sense her. Not too far from where I was standing, I heard her stifled breathing. I didn't know what she had planned, but— if this was the same Miss Kokoromi I knew, then it was certainly nothing good. It seemed like she truly had no intention of replying.

I tried inching forwards, relying solely on intuition. However, since my intuition was exceptionally dull when it came to anything except sensing ill-omens, I bumped into something before I even managed my third step. Based on its height, I guessed it was some kind of table, except, instead of

being supported by table legs, it stood on some sort of stand. Which means this was likely some kind of operating table, or—. Something compelled me to feel around on top of the table; I brushed against something soft yet rigid. It had no elasticity; instead, it felt almost jelly-like. What on earth was this? This faint, tepid, warmth… Ah, I have a feeling I know exactly what this is.

It likely had nothing to do with my sudden realization, but at that exact moment the fluorescent light came on overhead. It seems Miss Kokoromi had thrown the switch. And so, almost exactly as I had predicted, right in front of me was a large dissection table, and enshrined on it– at the end of my outstretched fingers– was the naked body of Utsurigi Gaisuke. No, it was just laying on its back, so '*enshrined*' was an odd choice of words, but now wasn't the time to fuss over word choice.

"……"

Utsurigi's body was **patched up** to some extent; most likely Miss Kokoromi's handiwork. The mutilated chest and stomach had been sutured up, and his slack jaw had been forcefully shut so you could no longer see the wound inside. Of course, there was no fixing his eyes or eyelids, so the hollow pits that they had been scooped out of unsettled me. Compared to his expressionless expression, even the stumps where his arms used to be were easier to look at.

Oh man. I couldn't imagine this as the same easygoing Utsurigi that I met yesterday. There wasn't a trace of him left.

"Like I thought, not even a yelp." Before I knew it, Miss Kokoromi was right behind me. "How should I put it, as always, ya manage to be cute and repulsive at the same time."

"And as always, you've got sick tastes, Miss." I removed my hand from Utsurigi's body and turned to face her. "What was the reason for all that?"

"There was no reason. It just was. Same with everythin' else."

"Don't try and dodge the question. I've got no clue what you're even saying."

"It's *'A clockwork Orange'*."

"Now I'm even more lost."

"It's called an analogy, Kiddo." Miss Kokoromi walked the perimeter

of the dissection table until she stood directly in front of me, with Utsurigi's body sitting in between us. "I guess it's less of an analogy and more of a metaphor."

"They're the same thing aren't they?"

"Hehe, the difference has to do with belief." She said something utterly incomprehensible. "Essentially, it's a matter of conviction. More importantly, it's time for your extracurricular lesson. Let's begin Miss Kokoromi's Vivisection Crash Course. Now then, Kiddo, why don'tcha start by telling me your impression of this here corpse."

"Hmm, let's see, just going off what I can see, it's just like I thought, he's dead."

"You fail." Her evaluation was as strict as you would expect from an anatomy instructor. "How 'bout I rephrase the question for the slower kids in the class? Whaddya reckon the cause o' death was?"

"He bled to death, didn't he? You said so yourself, right?"

"Nevertheless, that's the wrong answer." Miss Kokoromi said as she prodded Utsurigi's cheek with her finger. "The cause o' death was the destruction of his brain."

"…The destruction of his brain? What do you mean? Like a cerebral contusion?"

"Wrong. A cerebral contusion is when external trauma results in significant injury to the brain. But think about it, he had scissors stabbed into his eyes, didn't he?"

She said as she made a peace sign and stuck a finger into each of Utsurigi's hollow eye sockets. Did respect for the dead or sympathy for the departed mean anything to this woman? I suppose it didn't.

"They went pretty deep. If ya remember, they were buried to the handles. The blades woulda pierced straight through the cerebrum and lodged themselves in his thalamus."

"Well yeah, I could tell the blades reached his brain just by looking at him, but does that mean… there's a chance **he was stabbed through the eyes, not after he was dead, but while he was still alive?**"

"It ain't just a chance. The very first wound inflicted woulda been the

rupturing of his eyeballs and the destruction of his brain. The scissors were plunged into his grey matter and wrenched about, scrambling it. I reckon it took five to ten seconds."

It hurt just thinking about it.

"His stomach being sliced open, his legs being mangled, and his arms getting lopped off were all done posthumously. Ya can tell by the body's physiological reaction, can'tcha?"

"——You know human anatomy was never a strong subject for me," I said, taking care not to look at Miss Kokoromi or Utsurigi. "Besides, examining a body that's so horribly disfigured… is meaningless in every sense of the word."

"Then why'd ya come?"

"I was looking for a flash of inspiration. I'm a backwards thinker after all. Or was I the electric chair type? I can't remember."

"I did say that, didn't I? In that case, your good ol' teacher will explain everything. I'll stop pesterin' ya with questions for now, and answer a few of yours."

I couldn't help but feel hesitant. What on earth was she scheming? What on earth was she after? The only thing I knew for certain was that she was definitely up to something, but either way, I couldn't remain hesitant forever. Time felt like it had come to a halt in this artificially lit room, but every moment I spent here was another moment lost.

Three hours and ten minutes remained.

"——When was he killed?"

"At precisely one o'clock this morning?" she answered immediately.

"And there's no chance you're mistaken."

"My instincts are never mistaken."

She's going off instinct?

"I'm just yankin' your chain. Still, it shoulda been around one a.m. Right around when you met with Kasugai."

In other words, Kasugai couldn't be the culprit. The one who

corroborated that was none other than myself. Kasugai, the only person to leave their research ward last night (no matter how briefly), establishing an alibi was not an especially welcome development.

"You're telling the truth, right? You're not just trying to mess with me?"

"Do I look like someone who'd do something like that?"

"Do you really want me to answer? Besides, Miss, even if you're not just messing with me— there's always the possibility you're just saying what the professor ordered you to say."

"The professor, huh? …You're mighty suspicious, aren'tcha, kiddo? Oh well, I suppose it's fine." Miss Kokoromi acknowledged my doubts, but neither confirmed nor denied anything. "Either way, there ain't anything strange 'bout the time of death… The odd part comes next."

"The odd part?"

"The stomach and legs were mutilated right after the brain was destroyed. That's why there was such a garish amount of blood… but the arms."

Thwack, she slapped one of the stumps. She did some unbelievable things.

"These arms were lopped off several hours after death. The crucifixion— in other words, the skewering of the throat and legs was done even after that."

"…? But why?"

"Strange, ain't it? There was no real reason for them to wait to cut his arms off and string him up; they coulda done it right after killin' him. And yet, there's a time lag between time o' death and time o' crucifixion. What I'm gettin' at is our culprit hung around the scene of the crime for hours for no real reason. Why do you reckon that is?"

"'*Why?*'"

How should I know? Besides, I didn't even understand what the problem was? Sure, the time of death didn't match the time his arms were chopped off, but was it necessary to attach such importance to a difference of a couple hours?

“Couldn’t it just be that it took too long to mutilate the rest of the body? I’m much more interested in the reason they cut his stomach open, chopped his arms off, and crucified him in the first place. Isn’t that a more important question than ‘when?’”

“There was no reason. It just was.” Miss Kokoromi repeated her earlier line. “If there was a reason, then we’d have to grapple with whether it was justified or not. Not that you could excuse any sin with the right reason. A sin committed for no good reason warrants a larger punishment, is all I’m sayin’. If you’re gonna fuss over that, then the real question is why they killed him at all.”

“The reason people kill each other, huh? …but I can’t imagine there being a reason to kill Utsurigi…”

“I’m sure I taught ya that sort of thing before. People kill out of simple self-interest or base impulses. I’m talkin’ about whether those feelings are justified.”

“Ah, you mean *Thanatoast*?”

“It’s *Thanatos*, ya dunce. What kind of toast would that even be?”

“It’s hard to remember foreign words, you know…”

If I were to give a rough explanation of the ‘Thanatos’ that Miss Kokoromi was talking about, it would be something like the shared instinct of all animals, not just humans, that says, ‘*I want to experience death, but since I don’t want to die, I’ll kill someone else instead.*’ (but that’s a really rough explanation) Although I don’t think that has anything to do with this case.

For example, the typical reason a killer might dismember a body is primarily as a means to feel control over their victim. That’s how it was for last month’s case. To hurt, mutilate, and disfigure a helpless subject to their heart’s content. There likely wasn’t a single situation where you could possibly exert more control over someone. And speaking for Utsurigi’s crucifixion, if the killer was the kind of person who desperately craved the limelight, then that might be a possible reason his body was maimed to such an extent.

“……Even if that were true, there’s still something off about it.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“Let’s forget about the mutilation. The arms too. We can even set

aside the time lag for the time being. I won't pretend to understand any of that, but there's something I understand even less. The severed arms— **where on earth did they take them?**"

"—Well, I'll be."

Her uncharacteristic smile seemed to say, *'well spotted.'*

"That's right. Utsurigi's arms weren't at the crime scene— and by 'crime scene' I'm talkin' bout the whole entire Seventh Ward. Neither of 'em. It ain't the same as his eyes or stomach where they were just mutilated. They were taken. That's the one thing that makes it hard to say *'there was no reason. It just was.'"*

"……"

As I listened to her speak, I gazed at the stumps where Utsurigi's arms used to be. The exposed flesh had already started to blacken. Miss Kokoromi must've treated the area; the blood had been washed away and the flesh cleaned, but there's nothing that could be done to make the sight any less grotesque.

"Why did they take something heavy like his arms…?"

"Are ya open to a romantic interpretation?" Miss Kokoromi held up her index finger. "Utsurigi was a top-notch computer systems engineer. The culprit must've murdered him 'cause they were jealous of his talents. Nothin' motivates a criminal like jealousy, y'know? The desire to harm others comes from the fear of others surpassing ya… or maybe it's a sense of inferiority over other's convictions. Either way, jealousy is just the other side of envy. Our culprit admired Utsurigi; that's why they snatched his arms out of respect. So they-"

"So they took his arms as a souvenir? He isn't the Venus de Milo." I cut Miss Kokoromi's rambling short. "Take this a little seriously, Miss."

"I ain't the one who's gotta take it seriously, that'd be you, kiddo. This ain't got nothin' to do with me."

It was like I was speaking to a child, but she was right.

I had no choice but to do as I was told and give it some serious thought. The reason… the reason the killer felt the need to chop off the arms and carry them away…

"The first thing that comes to mind is some kind of fetish."

"That's hardly any different from what I said."

She was right again.

I really was the one who needed to take this more seriously.

The theft of his arms could be explained in an endless number of ways— nearly endless, anyhow. If Kunagisa were here, she could likely go through them all, but to me, it was an impossible task. And as I've said over and over again, I just don't have the time. Which means I had no choice but to accept a little arbitrary thinking. In other words, just like a mystery novel rich with heroic rationalism, I had to assume the arms were some sort of clue. If I presupposed the necessity of a reason for the arms being stolen— or at least not being left at the crime scene— then…

"Based on how he died— It must've been a cadaveric spasm."

A cadaveric spasm— in other words, instantaneous rigor mortis. It primarily occurs in cases of an especially violent death. There's a saying that goes: *'a drowning man will clutch at straw,'* but this was a real-world example of that phenomenon. Moments before death, if accompanied by horrific violence or intense pain, the dead will grip onto whatever they're holding with unbelievable strength. Because whatever physical limiters they once had are no longer functioning, their grip strength is often strong enough to warp the shape of a coin so long as the metal is soft enough.

The reason this is important is because, even after their deaths, the victim's grip is ridiculously hard to wrench open. Even if you used a bench or some kind of bar, it would still be an extraordinarily difficult procedure to pry open even an otherwise-weak person's fingers.

Take strangulation for example.

Let's say a victim unwittingly grabs onto a button on their assailant's jacket as they're being strangled (In other words, as they met their violent end). Let's say the button gets torn off, and winds up clenched in the victim's fist. This would serve as unshakeable evidence. Because unlike typical rigor mortis, a cadaveric spasm can't be staged. You can be, not just one-hundred percent, but two-hundred percent certain that whatever is clenched in the victim's fist was there at the moment the crime occurred.

From the point of view of the investigators, this acts as invaluable concrete evidence, but for the perpetrator, it serves as an insufferably concrete

obstacle. One they must avoid at all costs.

Even if that meant cutting the arms clean off, for example.

"There was a case like that before, wasn't there… The *'La Bansing Case'* or somethin'. I ain't too sure."

"I can't remember the name either…but in that case, instead of going through all the trouble to open the hand, it was quicker to just dispose of it all together."

"Then just cut the hand off at the wrist. There ain't no need to cut it off at the shoulder."

"It's misdirection, isn't it? If they just cut off the hands it'd be too conspicuous. After all, the cause of death was having his brain obliterated by a blade jammed through his eyes. There's hardly a more violent death out there. That more than meets the conditions for a cadaveric spasm. Who's to say he didn't snatch a button from someone's lab coat…"

That would be motive enough to take his arms. Even if it had nothing to do with a cadaveric spasm, the arms might've provided some other vital clue. That's why it was necessary for the culprit to remove them from the crime scene.

Unexpectedly, the whole eye-catching crucifixion and mutilation farce might've been done merely to obfuscate how bizarre the **theft of his arms** was, even if only a little. The best place to hide a tree is the forest, and the best place to hide a forest is the Amazon. Isn't that all this is?

"I see. That bloody ritualistic message would also make sense thinkin' like that. There ain't no meaning, it's just a bluff.《You just watch, 『DEAD BLUE』!!》, was it? Honestly, it don't make a lick of sense."

"……"

Huh? Could it be that Miss Kokoromi didn't know that the Dead Blue in question was actually Kunagisa Tomo? I see, Utsurigi himself had claimed he only called her that when he was speaking to her directly, so I suppose it's not too odd for her not to know. Even if the word *Cluster* had already become common parlance.

"Hold your horses, Kiddo," Miss Kokoromi said, changing topics, "ya mentioned **lab coats** just now, didn'tcha? Does that mean what I think it does? Are ya suggesting the culprit who killed Utsurigi is a faculty member?"

"……I suppose I am."

"Ya haven't changed one bit. Listen 'ere, Kiddo. Do you really think there's no chance Kunagisa or Suzunashi coulda done it? ……Whoa now, stop glarin' at me like that. Talk about scary. Miss Koko's shakin' in her boots."

Miss Koko? Who's that? I know no such person.

"Are you saying I'm soft on my friends?"

"Are ya sayin' y'ain't? After all the horrible things you've been through abroad, have ya still not learnt your lesson? Don'tcha know better by now, Kiddo?"

"It's not that— it's just that this is easier for me. The only reason I'm doing all this is to save Kunagisa, so doubting her is a non-starter."

"It ain't just a non-starter, it'd be the end. And it's always easier to **just** end it, ain't it?" Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "Hypothetically, what if Kunagisa is the culprit— what if the professor's theory is spot on?— What wouldya do?"

"I don't want to think about it."

"There might come a time when ya have to." Miss Kokoromi didn't let up. "You might think such a vague relationship will last forever, but ya couldn't be more wrong."

"I'm truly touched by your concern, Miss. I guess you haven't changed either."

"Oh? What makes you say that?"

"You still run your mouth like you know the first thing about me."

"That's still miles better than a certain someone who clams up and pretends not to know the first damn thing about himself."

Suddenly, Miss Kokoromi and I found ourselves glaring at each other. Invisible sparks flew over Utsurigi's corpse sandwiched between us. The first one to break eye contact was me, although that likely goes without saying. I looked away and said in a small voice, "Sorry. I went too far. I'll take your advice seriously. Even I don't think Kunagisa and I can carry on like this forever."

"Is that so? I s'ppose that's just how ya are. Ya see failure coming, but don't lift a finger to get out of the way."

"It's nothing as cool as that. There's just something wrong with my brain— No, my heart."

"Your heart, huh— Hehe, y'sure it ain't got somethin' to do with Magokoro?"

"……"

"I see. So that's how it is. I don't think ya need to feel that way, but what can ya do… Well then, I'm off. The professor wanted to see me. Feel free to stay as long as ya like. And don't worry, I won't snitch on ya. Bye-byee."

Miss Kokoromi turned away, made her way around the dissection table, and went to walk by me. As she did, I took hold of one of the oversized sleeves of her lab coat, stopping her from leaving.

"What is it? Ya want somethin'?"

"……"

"If ya don't want anythin', let go so I can have my cool exit."

"Miss… What're you after?" I said in a low voice without turning around, our backs still facing one another. "Why are you helping me? No… more importantly, why would you leave the ER3 System just to work in a facility like this?"

"Ya don't trust me?"

"Honestly, no. I don't trust you one bit," I continued flatly. "There's no reason for you to put yourself at risk by helping me, no reason to risk being ousted from the facility you left the ER3 System for— no reason at all."

"Glad ya think so highly of me," Miss Kokoromi let out a small laugh. "But don't go 'round thinkin' people are so cold-blooded."

"At the very least, I've always thought you were a pragmatist."

"Is that right?" Once again, Miss Kokoromi laughed lightly. "That's somewhat disappointing to hear. Hate to break it to ya, it's simpler than you think. I've already lost my reason to stay here. It died along with Utsurigi

Gaisuke."

"…? What do you mean?"

"…Just that. You heard the professor, didn'tcha? With Utsurigi dead, it's all over. He was spot on. And Miyoshi Kokoromi ain't got time to stick around a place that's already finished."

"But the professor doesn't seem like he's ready to give up yet. He'll start over again— or I guess it's more like he plans to continue where he left off."

"That's right, **using** Kunagisa Tomo," she said. "But I'm sure you've got thoughts about that too, don'tcha, kiddo? Don'tcha think it's absurd? Don'tcha think it's a desperate last resort? Don'tcha think it's just a temporary solution? Sure, there ain't no argument that Kunagisa'd make for a better sample than Utsurigi."

"……"

"But if he ain't careful, the professor could wind up turning the Kunagisa Syndicate, his very own backers, into his enemies. It's a stupid plan. I've no clue what he's thinkin'. Perhaps he thinks he can bargain with the Kunagisa Syndicate, but they ain't the kinda organization to let that sorta thing fly. Ain't that right, kiddo. They ain't the kind to take orders, just give them. The professor should know that already. He should know that better than anyone. Or maybe his memory's finally gotten that bad… I ain't nice enough to hang around while he hangs my ass out to dry. So you're damn right, I'm a pragmatist."

"So by helping me, you're just hoping to curry some favour with Kunagisa Tomo."

Miss Kokoromi didn't reply. I took her silence as her answer and let go of her sleeve. Even then, she said nothing. Neither did I. No one said a word.

I heard the door creak open, followed by the sound of it closing a few moments later.

Then silence.

The only ones left in the examination room were me and Utsurigi's corpse.

"……What a bunch of nonsense, huh, Utsurigi?"

I asked.

Surprisingly enough, there was no answer.

Secretary
UZE MISACHI

Assistant
OUGAKI SHITO

## DAY TWO (4) - THANATOPHILIA

## 0

*A strong person is far less dangerous than one without weakness.*

## 1

Kouta was sitting on the stairs.

I used the anti-lock blade to access the emergency stairwell in Miyoshi Kokoromi's Third Ward, but when I swung the door open, I froze. It was ten seconds later when I finally managed to ask, "what are you doing here?"

"I've been waiting ages for a certain someone to arrive," Kouta replied calmly. "'Tis not consummate."

"……Then your wait is over. But weren't you supposed to head back to Neo's ward?"

"Give it some thought. At present, Kasugai is paying Neo a visit. 'Tis hardly a consummate time to return."

Kouta stood up and dusted off the seat of her jacket. Then she stretched, making a show of cracking her neck.

Did she stay behind out of concern for me? I wondered, but I wasn't sure. Who could say? It was surely possible she had, but it was equally likely that she hadn't. I was uncertain. The odds were much the same as that coin we tossed earlier. I said nothing and returned the knife she had lent me.

"So, do you come bearing good news, my *dear friend?*"

"Somewhat," I closed the door behind me as I answered. "I've made some progress, but that's it. I've got even more information now, but I'm not any closer to piecing it together."

"Excessive information will only get in the way… but so be it. If you would be so kind as to tell me what you learned."

I didn't have any particular reason to hide anything, so I told her everything I'd gathered from Utsurigi's corpse as well as everything Miss Kokoromi taught me. Afterwards, I told Kouta all the details of our conversation. I have a poor memory, so my explanation wasn't very cohesive, but it looked like Kouta understood everything without me having to repeat myself.

"…The reason his arms were severed, you say?"

"The only reasons I can think of to dismember a body are to make transport and disposal easier, some kind of grudge, or for fetishistic reasons. But if it was just about the arms, then I think it's safe to assume there was some other reason for it."

"…You shot down Miyoshi's interpretation earlier, saying, *'he isn't the Venus de Milo.'* or what have you, but what did you mean by that?"

I struggled to wrap my head around Kouta's question at first, so, unsure why she was asking, I answered, "I didn't really mean anything. I was just talking about one of the many explanations for what happened to Venus' arms. Miss Kokoromi's theory reminded me of it, so I brought it up. Simple."

"My preferred interpretation is rather pedestrian, but I believe there were never any arms to begin with."

"Huh. Is that important?"

"Oh, it isn't. I'm just making conversation. It just goes to show that no matter the result, one is always left with a finished product. No matter the result— whatever that may be. Now then," Kouta narrowed her eyes at me, "What shall we do next?"

"Next…" I thought for a second, "For now, let's head to the roof. There's no point sitting around."

"As you command."

With a swoosh of her coattails Kouta began climbing the stairs. I followed after her. Somewhere around the tenth step, "while we're still on the subject," Kouta prefaced before saying, "I still haven't got your student-teacher relationship pinned down."

"Pinned down? What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'm not certain whether it's a relationship founded on trust.

This is just my perspective– that is, my own opinion– but, despite all you said earlier, you seemed assured of your safety. It's as if, deep down, you had faith that your **teacher** would not only keep your meeting a secret from the professor, but actually lend a hand."

"You've got the wrong idea, Kouta. I simply had no other option. There was always a chance that things would play out well for me, but make no mistake, I took one hell of a gamble."

"That may be. Nonetheless, I can't shake the illusion."

"Illusion, huh… There's a marked difference between trusting each other, and knowing each other's true nature," I replied bluntly. "There was no one abroad who I got along with worse."

"No one *abroad*, you say? The implication being?"

"There's a certain fortune teller here in Japan who I can't stand even more… Compared to her, Miss Kokoromi almost seems cute. Either way, that's just how it is. The connection between Miss Kokoromi and I is weaker than gravity on the moon."

"Perhaps," as if she were truly just making conversation, she readily conceded. "Now then, your time limit's down to precisely three hours. How do you fancy your chances?"

"They're not looking good. It's like: '*tune in next time to see how he gets himself out of this bind.*'"

"What on earth are you saying?"

"Nonsense."

Come to think of it, a long time ago, I read a book that had *tune in next time* written smack dab in the middle of the prologue. While I let my mind escape reality, Kouta and I arrived at the roof of the Third Ward. Kouta continued walking until she was standing in the centre of the roof. There, she raised her arms as if doing a banzai pose. Supposing she wasn't trying to call down a UFO, she was most likely just stretching.

"Everything considered, this place still has a really nice view," I found myself saying. "I wonder if it's because of the ocean of cedar. It almost helps me forget what I have to do. I wonder if this is what people mean when they say the scenery steals their heart."

“I don’t mean to spoil your poetry,” Kouta said plainly, “but ‘tis not cedar. ‘Tis primarily oak.”

“Huh? Really?”

“That, and chestnut. Also some pine. There are a fair few others mixed in as well, but no cedar.”

“Is that right? Wow… I thought all mountains had cedar.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong. Is your head alright? Well, talk of trees aside,” Kouta turned to face me, “do you know what I’m thinking right now, *dear friend?*”

“……No. Can’t say I do.” probably something to do with my lack of forestry knowledge. On second thought, probably not. “What is it?”

“I’m still a little astonished. With how quickly Miyoshi gave up, that is.”

“Ahh…” I nodded. “She did, didn’t she? Still, you can’t argue she was wrong, can you? She only acts in her own interest, so she was never going to stick around without a good reason.”

“Unlike Professor Kyouichirou, you mean?” Kouta said. “In your heart, he’s taken on quite the villainous role, hasn’t he? Although, who can blame you after how you’ve been treated. I suppose there’s no helping it. Decency is a luxury afforded only to the fortunate, after all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Only those with excess can start worrying about being good people. Heartwarming thought, ‘tis it not? And yet, we’re all merely scraping by,” she said cynically. “Of course, if one were a true genius like Kunagisa or Utsurigi, then they ought to be capable of kindness. There’s a saying that goes, *were I Thomas Edison, it’s possible I, too, would be called the father of invention*, or something to that effect. Someone with ten-billion yen, wouldn’t feel the pain of giving a billion away. Because when all is said and done, they would still be nine-billion yen richer.”

“Why are you covering for him? You’re the one who called this place a *graveyard* last night.”

“And? Grave robbing is one of the highest paying professions, don’t you know?” Kouta boasted casually. “Regardless, what’s most important is

the *'excess'*."

"Kunagisa aside— Utsurigi was plenty excessive, but he certainly wasn't kind. If anything, it just made him excessively unpleasant."

"Whether he showed kindness or not was a matter of his own discretion. How fortunate he was to have a choice. After all, wouldn't it be tragic to lack such leeway and have the decision thrust upon you?"

"Not tragic. Just sad," I replied indifferently before changing the subject. "Miss Kokoromi's already decided to leave, but what about Neo? If things play out like Miss Kokoromi said, then there's no real point in continuing to spy, is there? And… what about you? What'll you do, Kouta?"

"You needn't worry. Miyoshi, Neo, and I– our objectives are all separate, so we needn't walk the same path. Besides, while Miyoshi may have been quick to give up— and you can even argue she was smart to do so— from my perspective, the professor's proposal doesn't seem too bad. His chances of success aren't all that high, but you can't say they're especially low either. And supposing he does succeed, the merits— namely, Kunagisa Tomo— would be monumental. It's a risk bearing a consummate reward."

"It's been a pain in the ass for us though," naturally, my displeasure began seeping into my voice. "Every single one of them… they're nothing but vultures. Using other people as specimens, as guinea pigs, as lab rats… honestly, are they even human?"

"They used to be. Before they became academics."

Kouta's cynical reply sent shivers through my entire body. When it came to being inhuman, this woman stood head and shoulders above the rest, didn't she?

"Then again, when you said, *'every single one of them,'* I'm sure you meant me as well. Still, that, too, is consummate. Now then. Shall we return to Neo's place for the time being and revise our strategy? Perhaps Neo's got his mits on some new information. Besides, 'twould be wise to inquire about what the professor's been up to."

"……"

As Kouta spoke, I gazed off in the opposite direction of Neo's Fifth Ward. In other words, towards the Second Ward. More specifically, I was trying to eyeball how wide the gap was between here and there. Seemingly catching on to what I was doing, Kouta asked, "what's on your mind?" and

twirled around to face me.

"I'm thinking about whether it would be possible to get to the Seventh Ward from here."

"……I believe I told you 'twas impossible."

"But I've yet to hear the reason. Look, from what I can tell, the distance to the Second Ward is two metres. That's about the same distance as the one between the Fifth and Fourth Wards… No, if anything, this one looks a bit shorter. Next, we'd go from the Second Ward to the Primary Ward… the central research ward where the professor is. I think I remember the gap between those two not being too wide either."

"You're awfully fixated on this, aren't you…? Perhaps the obsessive one was you all along?" Kouta sounded somewhat exasperated. "'Tis not consummate in the slightest."

"Then tell me why. Why is it impossible?"

I didn't have the right angle to gauge the distance between the Primary Ward and the Sixth Ward from here, nor the distance between the Sixth Ward and the all-important Seventh Ward. Was that the issue that Kouta was alluding to? I didn't know. However, Kouta has spent far more time in this facility than I had. When it came to *infiltration* or *breaking in*, Kouta's opinion held far more weight than mine. I knew that. And yet-

"I still can't come up with any other way someone could break into the Seventh Ward while bypassing the security system."

"If that's all you can think of, then you're better off not thinking at all," Kouta said bluntly. "…You wouldn't understand even if I explained it to you, so why not see it for yourself? For a backwards thinker, there's no such thing as a waste of time, so 'tis actually more wasteful to stand here and argue about it,"

Kouta said and began walking towards the Second Ward. Then, as casually as if hopping over one of the puddles, she found herself on the roof of the Second Ward. No matter how many times I assure myself it's only two metres, her bravery despite the fact that a simple slip could cost her her life astonished me.

I followed after her, making my way to the Second Ward. Kouta moved quickly, reaching the opposite ledge of the roof in no time at all. Once there, she waited for me. I caught up, and when I looked, the gap between the

Second and Primary wards was around three metres… No, not even. Compared to the gap between the Third and Fourth Wards, it may as well have been nothing.

With only a brief run-up, Kouta leapt to the Primary Ward. It was readily apparent that she was not giving it her all, as her light jump saw her safely on the roof of the other ward. As soon as she landed, she turned around and waited for me in silence. Given that this was already my fifth jump, I had naturally grown somewhat accustomed to it. That said, I hear it's acrobats who've grown complacent who are in the most danger. I braced myself and jumped.

"…I guess this is some kind of helipad," I muttered, standing at the edge of a giant circle (with a large 'H' drawn in the middle) painted on the roof of the Primary Ward. "This antenna's pretty massive too… despite how remote we are, I guess this means we're not entirely cut off from outside communication…"

"Changing your mind about asking for help from Kunagisa's brother or that contractor you're acquainted with?" Kouta prodded at me. "Go right ahead. I'm sure they'll come to your rescue straight away."

Kouta didn't seem especially conscious of it, but the way she spoke– it almost sounded like she actually knew Nao and Aikawa. Despite my suspicions, I didn't press the matter. In hindsight, I probably should have, but I'm neither clever enough nor psychic enough to regret things before they happened. "I don't have to resort to that quite yet," I dismissed her before looking eastward. Wards one through five had been arranged in a straight line, but likely due to being an architectural afterthought, the Sixth and Seventh Wards were built to the side. So when I turned, the Sixth Ward was directly ahead of me, with the Seventh Ward just beyond it.

Kouta gazed down at the rooftop as if she could peer straight though it. "What sort of scheme do you think Professor Kyouichirou is concocting at this very instant to implicate you… or rather, Miss Kunagisa as the culprit? Ha, even supposing we succeed at infiltrating the Seventh Ward, who's to say we won't run headfirst into someone already tampering with evidence?"

"We have no choice but to take that chance."

"I suppose we don't. We shall just have to trust Neo on that front. Even if putting trust in others isn't your cup of tea."

Kouta grinned inappropriately and began walking towards the Sixth Ward.

"I guess— wait, hang on?"

The roof of Sixth Ward didn't have anything resembling an entrance. Right, according to Shito, the Sixth Ward was a power generator— what type was it again? A carbon generator? Silicone, maybe? Or was it nitrogen? I felt like it was one of those three, but then again, I wasn't really listening so I can't be too sure— and as such, there was no way in or out, let alone a line for hanging laundry. I suppose that was to be expected; however, looking across to the roof of the Seventh Ward, I couldn't make out any doors either. On the eastern edge, there was a large water tank accompanied by a number of wide pipes, but aside from that, the roof was completely flat and empty.

"Is that what you meant, Kouta?" I asked, in a daze. "The Seventh ward never had a rooftop entrance to begin with—"

"It most certainly does," Kouta replied immediately. "Can you not see it? How's your eyesight?"

"I haven't had it checked lately, but I haven't noticed it getting any worse, so it's probably still 20/20."

"Then you should be able to see it. 'Tis roughly three metres in front of the water tank. Do you see that round iron cover that resembles a manhole? 'Tis more of an emergency exit than an entrance, but it should grant rooftop access."

Exactly as Kouta said… once she pointed it out to me, I noticed the door (if I could even call it that). However, given the distance and the fact that the Sixth Ward still lay in between us, it was still barely visible. How powerful was Kouta's eyesight for her to make out something like that? The glasses she wore must've just been for show after all.

"The reason we can't use this path is something else entirely. Now then, shall we head to the Sixth Ward? You'll understand once you get a closer look."

Kouta said before leaping the gap between the Primary and Sixth Wards. The gap in question being roughly one and a half metres. It was so narrow that if we laid Kunagisa on her back with her arms outstretched, we could've used her as a bridge (as horrible as that was to imagine). I cleared the gap without even taking a running start. It was remarkably easy, but when I looked down, I felt a slight shiver run through me. You might be tempted to say, *'well don't look down then,'* but human psychology is a curious thing.

"Now. Do you finally understand," before I'd even had a chance to

catch up, Kouta called out to me from the far side of the Sixth Ward, “the reason why this route to Seventh Ward is impossible?”

“……”

As I approached her, the meaning behind Kouta’s words grew more and more clear. By the time I made it halfway across the roof, I had no choice but to agree with her– no matter how much it pained me to.

“…what on earth?”

Without a doubt, this was… impossible.

The distance between the Sixth and Seventh Wards. Compared to the distances we’d already crossed— The two metres between the Fifth and Fourth Wards, the three and a half metres between the Fourth and Third Wards, the nearly two metres between the Third and Second Wards, the almost three metres between the Second and Primary Wards, and the metre and a half between the Primary and Sixth Wards— the difference was an order of magnitude. No, it wasn’t that great, but the gap was so distressingly large, that if you were to insist it was, I doubt anyone would correct you.

Five metres.

Five metres…

“Impossible, is it not?” Kouta repeated. “Now do you understand why I claimed this route was hopeless, *dear friend?*”

“I see…”

Five metres. Risking your life on a jump like this was beyond reckless. You wouldn’t be risking your life so much as throwing it away. I don’t know all that much about athletic records, but going off what Kouta said earlier, the world record’s eight metres and ninety-five centimetres. Let’s call it nine metres even. The gap between these two wards was a full four metres shorter. But just like when Kouta explained it to me the first time, I didn’t appreciate the comparison to the world record holders. I was Japanese, and not an especially well trained one at that. And while I may not be at Kunagisa’s level, I was most certainly the indoor type.

Five metres.

Surely, this was too much to ask of me.

"…Now then, no sense dawdling. Let's return to Neo's for the time being. Who's to say there isn't another route out there—?"

As I listened to Kouta's empty placations— No, I wasn't listening— I tormented myself over and over. I couldn't shake the thought. *'This was too much'*. An unshakeable, immaculate impossibility.

" _____"

And yet,

**For that very reason**.

The crucified Utsurigi *'Malignant Green'* Gaisuke. His arms severed, his eyes and brain devastated, his throat gouged out, dissected like a frog and gutted like a fish, and his shattered legs run through. That empty, inhuman, hollow room, stained an unsettling reddish-brown, and that bloody message— in the truest sense.

The research ward and its unflinching security system melded into one massive locked room. There was no record of anyone having entered. And apart from one exception, no record of anyone stepping foot outside. A crime only physically or logically possible to the security system's former administrator, Kunagisa *'Dead Blue'* Tomo, the leader and iron-fisted ruler of the *TEAM* responsible for rewriting Japan's cyber law fifty-five times over. Her, and her alone.

*The Mad Daemon* Shadou Kyouichirou's research facility.

It was absurd. This was no ordinary case. A crime so impossible, it left no room for argument. A murder so unusual, it defied explanation. A situation so anomalous, it was beyond reproach.

That's why. That's why.

The solution to this case had to be psycho logical. It had to be. It can't just be the killer. I, too, had to be mad. That's the logic here.

I breathed deep. Once. Twice. Three times.

"…Hold on. What are you planning, *dear friend,*" Kouta said suspiciously. "I suddenly had a terrible premonition."

"It's about to come true."

I said, and from where I was standing—roughly ten metres away from the edge of the Seventh Ward— I took off. I had no room for error. None whatsoever. I couldn't waste a single centimetre that was given to me. I thought nothing, I felt nothing, I even forgot I was still alive; every muscle was working at maximum capacity. My brain had long since ceased its function. Like a tin-man without a heart, it did as I commanded.

Not yet. Don't jump yet. One more step.

"Wait—you idiot!"

For the first time since I'd met her, Kouta's refined mannerisms gave way to a genuine outburst of emotion— the instant after her jeers washed over me, I planted my left foot. It felt like subatomic particles were coursing through me, like all my blood was gushing out, like my head was being bathed in liquid nitrogen. While I've never been showered with subatomic particles, bled out, or doused in liquid nitrogen, if I had, I imagine this is what it'd feel like.

In other words.

I was set free from everything.

Liberated from everything.

Unfettered.

This is dying.

This is what it means to die.

To fade away.

To disappear.

To end.

Death.

With this. I can die. I will die. I have died. I am dying. I was dying. I had been dying. I will be dying. I will have died. I'm dead.

"And that's why—"

As my life flashed before my eyes, I was suddenly reminded of something someone once told me.

“You should just die.”

Yeah.

You’re right.

## 2

……

“Kusanagi? Kuginasa? What was it again?”

“Kunagisa, it’s Kunagisa. K-U-N-A-G-I-S-A, Kunagisa. Then Tomo, for friend. Kunagisa Tomo.”

“Hm, I see. Kunagisa, huh? Your hair’s pretty cool.”

“You can call me Tomo.”

“Is that right? Then you can call me Tomo, too.”

“That’s confusing. I’m gonna call you Iichan.”

“Then I’ll call you Iichan, too.”

“That’s confusing.”

……

……

“That one’s like a baby bird.”

“A baby bird? What do you mean?”

“Do you know what imprinting is? They say when baby birds are born, the first living thing they see, no matter what it is, they love it like a parent… Although that’s nothing more than superstition.”

“You think your sister sees me that way?”

“I do. As of now, you’ve become her one and only compass. You’ve become something completely irreplaceable. A fact I find utterly unpleasant.”

“It’s no fun for me either.”

“You’ve been given a privilege. The privilege to demand obedience

from Tomo as you see fit, as if you were her parent. You've gained complete ownership over Kunagisa Tomo."

"Some parents are killed by their children, Nao."

……

……

"Wanna die? Wanna die and make amends? Wanna be forgiven?"

"……"

"Then pray. Just pray. Cry, and beg for forgiveness. Clasp your hands in prayer."

"……"

"Like I once prayed to Kunagisa Nao, call upon god or even the devil."

"……"

"When I'm born again, please make me a dog or a cat."

"……"

"I'd be fine with a pig, or a cow, or even a monkey. Hell, I'd settle for a worm. Just so long as I never run into Kunagisa Tomo…"

……

……

……

I'd probably only lost consciousness for a moment— less time than it would take you to blink. I was lying on the bare concrete roof of the Seventh Ward. I suppose it's more accurate to say I was splayed out. I'd likely fumbled the landing. My legs hurt a little. However, that was clearly just due to the impact. If so, then the instant I landed, out of relief— or perhaps despondency— my senses must've briefly abandoned me. It seems I had unconsciously braced myself, so none of my injuries were especially injurious. Compared to the beating I took from Suzunashi and Miss Kokoromi this morning, it may as well have been just some minor bruising.

“Good grief— I must have done something terrible in a past life…”

I had survived.

I made the jump.

As I came to terms with that fact, I slowly picked myself up. At least I tried to.

“——I am beyond exasperated with you right now.”

A voice came from right beside me, causing me to abandon the attempt halfway through. There, with her denim coat flapping in the breeze, stood Ishimaru Kouta, glaring down at me.

“……Huh? Wait, wha-…”

I turned my head in the direction I had just come from, in other words, towards the Sixth Ward. Kouta wasn’t there. That meant, supposing I hadn’t failed the jump after all and this was all some sort of hallucination as I teetered between life and death, Kouta had successfully made the jump as well. While the former didn’t seem out of the realm of possibility (better odds than a coin toss at least), the pain I felt surging through my body was undoubtedly real. That said, phantom pain is a real phenomenon. Since I couldn’t be sure, I figured I’d ask.

“I’m alive, right?”

“You’re not dead, I’ll grant you that much,” Kouta replied coldly, “but I wouldn’t call anyone who would senselessly rush to their own death truly alive.”

“I see…”

This time I succeeded in picking myself up, and I rose to my feet. My muscles, bones, and sinew all appeared to be in working order. I did something resembling stretches before turning to Kouta and saying, “So you made the jump too, huh?” Kouta didn’t answer; she just let out a huge sigh.

“I may have made a mistake in choosing you as my compatriot,” she said. “I never expected I’d be party to such recklessness. This is not consummate. Not consummate in the slightest.”

“But, with this, we just proved it’s possible to jump from the Sixth Ward to the Seventh— in other words, we found a way in. Everything turned

out alright, Kouta. We've established a route into the Seventh Ward. This case is no longer a locked room—"

In other words, the researchers were no longer above suspicion. By moving from rooftop to rooftop, I had proven with my very body that the researchers could've infiltrated the Seventh Ward without ever needing to bother with what was previously thought to be the only entrance. That way, the security wouldn't have logged their comings and goings from their own wards, let alone the Seventh Ward.

Of course, all I'd done is prove that anyone could be the culprit; I still had no clue who it might be. At the very least, there was no longer any reason —any good reason, that is— for all suspicion to rest on Kunagisa. None at all.

"You don't even stop to consider the consequences of your actions, do you?" Kouta's voice was still as cold as ever. She seemed extraordinarily upset by my unilateral decision making. "*'Everything turned out alright'?* Hilarious. Don't make me laugh. Perhaps you should have Miss Miyoshi cut open that brain of yours. I'm sure she'll find all your wires crossed."

"That's a bit harsh… Look, I'm sorry for running ahead, but wasn't it worth it to prove that this gap isn't as uncrossable as it looks?"

"I assumed you had the common sense to listen until I was done explaining. In what way have I ever, even once, claimed, *'you can't jump from the Sixth Ward to the Seventh'*?"

"……?"

Kouta's words naturally raised some questions— or should I say, they evoked a feeling not all too dissimilar to unease. That's right. When it came to outrageousness, there was no one more outrageous than Kouta. Whether it be casually infiltrating the facility under the name *Zerozaki*, cooperating with someone as shady as Neo, or, regardless of her own reasons for doing so, rescuing Kunagisa, Suzunashi, and me. The risks she took dwarfed any potential reward. So there's no way Kouta would be this upset simply over me taking a risk— that, while life threatening, didn't actually cost me my life— would she?

In other words… **there was some other reason**, wasn't there?

Once I'd figured that much out— I began thinking. Then, I realized. I figured it out. That's right. Given my lack of training, I never should have been able to clear five metres. So, despite knowing my odds of success, how come I still attempted it? Why? I must have noticed it subconsciously.

I turned back to the Sixth Ward once more.

And then,

"……Oh man……"

I see.

That's how it is.

That's what you were getting at, weren't you, Kouta?

Acceptance. From the bottom of my heart. Then despair. From the bottom of my heart. Both for my own idiocy, and the truth behind Kouta's insistence that *'this route was impossible.'*

"I'm not in the habit of complaining about what's already said and done, nor do I find any pleasure in it," Kouta's frigid voice called out from behind me. "But please recognize that you've put us both in a far more precarious position than we already were, *dear friend*. Should you run off on your own again, I shall have no choice but to rethink our alliance."

"…I understand…"

I nodded before once again confirming the *reality* of our situation. I wanted to confirm whether it was possible I had been mistaken, only to confirm beyond a shadow of a doubt that I wasn't.

When compared to the Seventh Ward, the Sixth Ward was just a little bit **taller**. Which is to say, the Seventh Ward was constructed a little **shorter** than all the rest. It was hard to tell from the Sixth Ward, but from this side— from the shorter side— it was strikingly obvious. The roof of the Sixth Ward sat somewhat higher—by a couple dozen centimetres or so— than the Seventh Ward's. Now then, as for what that means-

It meant the jump from **that side** to **this side** was easier. Even if the horizontal distance was five metres, gravity and the angle of the jump gave you an additional couple dozen centimetres of wiggle room. That was likely the reason I made it. It would've been nice to attribute it to my fiery resolve allowing me surpass my own limits, but the realistic explanation was far more convincing.

But so what if the jump had been easier? The fact that this ward was the only one that sat lower than the other wards could only mean one thing,

"……**We can't go back**,"

I muttered.

I hadn't meant to mutter, but I did regardless.

"Precisely, *dear friend*," Kouta twisted the knife. "The reason this route is ineffective is precisely so. It seems that since this ward was built later, it is the only ward that **is not a uniform height**. The Sixth Ward is taller. So yes, unless you intend to leap around seven metres, I don't suspect you will be making it back."

"……"

"If you wish to see for yourself, then by all means, don't hold back on my account."

"I'll pass…" I took a step back- an act that was already more than I could bear and I crumbled to my knees. "……Oh man……I'm such an idiot."

"'Tis consummate so long as you understand. Most things can be smoothed over with an apology, after all." Kouta shrugged, her icy tone regaining its warmth at long last. "Besides, I won't deny I'm somewhat to blame for not being as forthcoming as I could have been."

She had a point. If she hadn't beaten around the bush, insisting, *'you'll know it when you see it,'* and had told me straightforwardly, *'the Seventh Ward is a different height, so even if you can cross over, you wouldn't be able to make it back,'* this all could have been avoided. That said, I really should have *known it when I saw it,* so I suppose it's still my responsibility. The only explanation I could come up with was that the blood had rushed to my head.

"I guess the locked room remains locked after all…" I mumbled dejectedly. "…but maybe one of the faculty members is actually extraordinarily athletic."

"Even supposing they are, 'tis still not consummate, *dear friend*. There is yet another reason I consider this route impossible. Do you remember what it is?" Kouta asked. "Last night, when you and I met– It was just starting to rain, was it not?"

"Rain…?"

"My eyes fell on the roof beneath my feet. They had mostly dried by

now, but there were still traces of the puddles left behind by the night before.

That's right. Rain. **It was raining all night**.

"…I-" Why had I only realized that now? "Uh…"

"Miyoshi claimed the time of death to be some time around one o'clock in the morning… For our purposes, let's say that's when they crossed from the Sixth Ward to the Seventh Ward. However, that's not all she said, is it? For whatever reason, the arms were severed **several hours later**. In other words, on their return trip—once they were done with Utsurigi's murder and the redecoration that ensued— would it not have been raining?"

It was clear what that meant. It couldn't have been simpler. A record you set under perfect conditions would be impossible in the rain. And you definitely weren't about to surpass it.

I had been careless. Far too careless. If I had just remembered that it had been raining last night, I might even have been able to realize this route was impossible on my own. I had been hopelessly stupid. I always panic and rush headlong into things, only for them to blow up in my face. Even death couldn't cure my idiocy.

"What do we do…?"

Far from dispelling the locked room, it had only sealed even tighter. What's more, we found ourselves sealed inside. Naturally, since Kouta and I didn't possess a key-card or ID, didn't know the password, weren't registered in the vocal or retinal scan system, and didn't have administrator access like Kunagisa, we couldn't use the front door. And even though this research ward was shorter than the others, I wasn't about to leap off like a flying squirrel. And while I couldn't say for certain, as far as I could tell, Kouta didn't have wings. What's more, the building was windowless. We were boxed in– in the truest sense of the word.

"You're down to two hours and forty minutes. 'Tis not much time to think," Kouta said after a moment's pause. "For now, shall we get to work? We managed to infiltrate the Seventh Ward at great pains— for better or worse— so why don't we investigate, and think about what comes next later, *dear friend*?"

"…You're awfully optimistic."

"Because I'm not the one in peril,"

Kouta said as she began to open the manhole-like cover next to the water tanks. Either due to rust, or because it was designed to be unwieldy, it didn't open easily. I lent a hand, and the two of us finally managed to pry open the iron cover.

"No need to be so crestfallen, *dear friend*. Perhaps we'll find a sturdy rope somewhere in the ward. Who's to say we won't find something strong enough to hold our weight? If we do, then we'll be able to escape."

"Do you actually think we'll find one?"

"Not a chance," Kouta's consolation left something to be desired. "Shall we be off, *dear friend*?"

Regardless, that's the only option we had left. Using the iron ladder, the two of us made our way into the Seventh Ward.

## 3

Thirty minutes later.

The gruesome smell still lingered at the scene of Utsurigi's murder; Kouta and I stood idly, without a word spoken between us, as if we were merely there out of a grim sense of obligation.

Kouta leaned her tall frame against the wall by the door, her arms crossed and eyes closed as if deep in thought about something. Looking at her now, you could even mistake her for some sort of philosopher. That's how dreadfully serene and detached she was. In direct contrast, like a shaved cat, I had been walking frantic circles around this hideous, reddish brown, unfurnished room for quite some time now. It was as if I had forgotten how to walk.

Shit. I never thought a time limit would be this painful. The remaining time— two hours and fifteen minutes. And that was a generous estimate.

Now that Utsurigi's body had been removed from his private quarters and from the Seventh Ward altogether, it was like the air itself had shifted. It was like it left nothing but emptiness in its wake. I visited this place last night, and then again this morning. This was my third total visit, and yet the atmosphere was different each time. I never liked that man, nor did I believe I ever could have, but the first time I'd entered this room, despite how vehemently we argued, was still the least objectionable of the three. As for the most objectionable, that would have to be right now.

"—Have you not discovered anything?" It was the first time in the last twenty-five minutes that Kouta opened either her eyes or her mouth. "I can't say the remaining time is looking all that consummate, my *dear friend*."

"I haven't found anything," I spoke for the first time in twenty-eight minutes. "Not only have I not figured out the trick, I've completely lost the plot by this point… I sincerely have no clue."

"Is that whining, I hear?"

"It's the truth. I've been wracking my brain this entire time. Anybody else would have come up with something by now, but I've got nothing. I don't have the slightest idea what thought process could've led the culprit to do

this."

"Thought process, you say? …There's always the chance they weren't thinking at all."

"…Yeah. That's always possible."

If so, then my hands were tied. As an uninvolved bystander, even if I were able to predict someone's thought process, I couldn't read their thoughts themselves. Of course I couldn't.

"It appears ritualistic… you could almost call it religious. No offence to religious people. This case isn't just bizarre, it's downright uncanny. You can always explain away the bizarre, but there's nothing to be done about the uncanny. It doesn't get more gruesome than **that**."

"Is that so?" Kouta sounded surprised. "I've seen plenty of bodies far more gruesome than that. Dead or otherwise. I try not to rank them, but if I had to pick the worst of the bunch, it would have to be a certain severed head I came across two years back."

"You mean a headless corpse?" My train of thought wasn't going anywhere, so I humoured her. "If that's all, then I've seen one too."

"No, it **wasn't** a corpse. The head managed to survive on its own."

"That's impossible. If you were just a head, you would die."

"Not if you receive the proper medical care. After all, the heart is nothing more than a pump. The lungs serve only to provide oxygen, and you wouldn't be wrong to say the other organs exist to create nutrients. So long as the brain still receives blood, oxygen, and nutrients, it's entirely possible to live on as just a head. Of course, since they had no throat or any other organs, they weren't able to speak, but we still managed to communicate."

"……What's the point of all that?"

"There was no point. Just curiosity. You can't say you weren't a little curious just now, can you? About whether someone could truly live as just a head. I understand that feeling well. Compared to something like that—" Kouta set her eyes on the far wall. The traces of where Utsurigi had been pinned still remained. "—the manner in which Utsurigi was killed doesn't seem all that illogical. The opposite, even."

Kouta gently picked herself up off the wall, and opened the door.

"Where are you going?"

"You're lucky I'm so considerate. 'Tis easier to think when you're alone, is it not?"

"Well, sure… but where are you headed?"

"Have you forgotten my occupation?" Kouta flashed a daring smile. "We finally managed to infiltrate the impregnable Seventh Ward. I might as well pick up a few things. On the off chance they haven't already disposed of them, that is… regardless, I'll be back soon."

With that, Kouta stepped out of the room.

"Occupation, huh? … but I'm just a student…" I muttered, as I made my way over to where Kouta once stood, before similarly propping myself up against the wall. "……why did things turn out this way…? Why do things always turn out like this, every goddamn time?"

I complained. To no one.

"I can't take it anymore. I– really can't. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of it. It's too much."

Damnit. God fucking damnit. You subhuman bastard. You may as well die right here and now. Let your blood muddle together with Utsurigi's. Take that knife out of your breast pocket, plunge it into your stomach, and wrench it upwards. Drag your guts out and scatter them across the room. Liven things up by chewing your own liver, and then plunge the blade into your worthless eyes. Once you pierce your own brain, it may finally start to work properly. Drag the knife down your skull, across your throat, and through your collarbone; carve through your sternum and sever your aorta, and if you still have the strength and presence of mind, finish with your heart. That way, you're certain to create a splendid fountain of blood. The only question is whether the knife would hold out that long. Even if it doesn't, you're sure to die anyway. And if you're born again, study, study, study, so you can become a researcher. Open up a research facility in the heart of the mountains, and even if it all falls apart, don't go insane; continue your thankless work day and night for the sake of the world and all the people who live there. Toil away in obscurity in the name of the needy and the disadvantaged. Don't buy into the cheap stereotype that *'all scientists are mad.'* Always think of other people. Become the kind of person who can put others first.

"…Oh man…what am I even thinking?"

Your life's basically over once you start fantasizing about your next. I'm just so tired. With my back still pressed to the wall, I slowly sank to the floor. My heart felt too heavy. Even though I had fully crumpled to the ground, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was still falling. I gripped my head and sighed deeply.

"I've finally snapped…"

Kunagisa's words ran through my mind. If I ever felt like I wasn't enough, I could always call Nao. Or perhaps *Humanity's Strongest*, the *Red Contractor*. If I just ask for her help, I wouldn't have to bear this agony anymore. I could borrow a phone from Neo…… or maybe connect to the network and send out a message. It'd take a bit of effort, but it wouldn't be all too difficult in the long run. Despite having an out like that, my contradictory nature meant I couldn't take it. But am I really tolerant enough… righteous enough to forgive that contradiction?

Haven't I done enough?

"……Of course I haven't."

There's no point in putting in effort unless you see it all the way through.

Even if you could hardly call this 'putting in an effort.'

"How pathetic…"

There's a difference between scarcity and value. I mumbled and stood up, not even trying to hide my frustration with myself over how dangerously close I came to blaming my own powerlessness on the world— No, over how dangerously close I came to revealing that I already did, and for trying to run away.

As I thought about how much time I wasted on pointless wallowing, I gazed at the far wall.

《You just watch, 『DEAD BLUE』 !!》

"《Shut up and watch,》 huh…? Could this be some kind of code?"

It's not impossible that the culprit had left some kind of clue on purpose. Ignoring any potential inconsistencies, I took the twenty letters written on the wall and tried rearranging them. I tried removing letters, adding letters, writing it in other languages, and a number of other tests, but it never

amounted to anything conclusive. Halfway through, I managed to forcefully come up with '*DARAKU ZANMAI*', the Japanese reading of the characters used to spell '*Mad Daemon*', but that felt like too much of a stretch. I might have to take the message at face value after all.

By the time I came to that conclusion, I only had two hours left.

"Honestly, Kunagisa, what am I supposed to do?"

I called out for Kunagisa just like I had long ago, back before I knew she was a girl. Naturally, the Kunagisa Tomo from six years ago wasn't here, and the current Kunagisa Tomo was still below the Fourth Ward. Obviously, there was no answer.

However, in that answer's stead– Suddenly, out of nowhere— an ear-piercing alarm rang out from the hallway. No— this was no mere alarm. It was a shockwave. The air pressure alone was enough to batter my eardrums. The alarm was so harsh, that even someone with perfect pitch would be hopeless to place it. It carried in through the open door.

"What the- Did I do something!?"

I yelled as I rushed outside. There was no real reason for me to be shouting, it's just that the alarm was so loud that if I didn't, I wouldn't have been able to hear myself speak. As I stepped out into the hallway, the sound got even louder. It's like someone was crashing a symbol directly inside my skull.

"——————!"

I could no longer hear myself, even when I shouted. My own voice could do nothing to resist the oncoming tsunami of sound. There had to be a speaker around here somewhere. As that thought occurred to me, I clasped both hands over my ears and desperately scanned the ceiling. Unless I find and destroy the speaker soon, my already unstable brain would go completely insane.

But before I could even find the speaker, the alarm abruptly stopped. I cautiously removed my hands from my ears, but I quickly thought better of it. What if this was merely the eye of the storm? It was naïve to be comforted by a momentary reprieve when a second wave might be just around the corner. Hang on a second, I'm indoors, not about to be swept up in a typhoon. Oh man, I was completely disoriented. What was I even talking about? Am I stupid?

“Still feeling consummate, I hope.” The stairwell door opened as Kouta returned from downstairs. “Greetings, I hope you haven’t missed me.”

“Missed you? You’ve only been gone fifteen minutes—”

“Is that so? How consummate.”

Kouta grinned and pulled the brim of her cap down. Almost as if she were trying to avoid my gaze. No doubt about it. Kouta was unbelievably suspicious.

“Kouta… what did you do?”

“I got my hands on these,” Kouta reached into her coat and pulled out what I believed to be four MO disks which she fanned out for me to see. “They don’t pertain to my objective, but Utsurigi’s research data is too good a find to pass up.”

“I see you found the alarm as well…” even I was surprised by the exasperation in my voice. “I know this is rich coming from me, but… did you ever stop to consider the consequences?”

“How rude, of course I did. I’m in the middle of thinking about them as we speak.”

It’s a bit late for that.

“What a perfect pair we make…” I muttered. A joke that felt all too real. “What should we do? That sound just now likely carried all the way to the Primary Ward. Then again, the place is sealed tight, so maybe not. Either way, the Professor should have gotten some sort of security alert.”

“How splendid it would be if they mistook it for a false alarm, but life is hardly ever that consummate.” She still talked as if it had nothing to do with her, despite the fact that she was directly responsible this time. “How bothersome.”

How bothersome indeed.

I was used to Kouta dragging me along, but I can’t say I expected her to drag me down like this. In all sincerity, what nonsense.

“…Let’s escape to the roof. They might not find us there.”

“Agreed. ‘Tis certainly favourable to staying inside at least.” Kouta

answered urgently before taking off towards the stairwell. We opened the door with the lock picking blade, went up the stairs, climbed the ladder, threw open the iron cover, and stepped out onto the roof. After a brief stretch, Kouta began crawling her way towards the roof's western edge. I didn't know what she was up to, but I found myself following suit. From there, I could see two figures jogging down the cedar pathway— or was it oak? I can't quite remember— at a half jog (the contradictory nature of that last sentence should illustrate just how shaken I was). I see, we were lying down so that they wouldn't spot us. And here I was, certain that Kouta was just an eccentric like Samuel Beckett. Okay, maybe not.

"—...Let's see." If I strained my eyes, I could just make out their silhouettes. "…That's Shito……, ……and Misachi……isn't it?"

"It would appear so." Still crawling, Kouta made her way back to where she could no longer be seen from the ground before kipping up to a standing position. "They must have been ordered by the professor to come and take a look…or so it would seem."

The two of them rounded the corner and faded out of sight. They were headed towards the Seventh Ward's entrance, the insulated steel door. After confirming that was the case, I crawled back just like Kouta had. However, now that I think about it, they wouldn't have been able to see me anyway because of the angle, so there was no real point in doing so.

"While I wouldn't call this consummate, I suppose we should still count ourselves fortunate," Kouta said. "I was concerned a whole squadron of guards would descend on us……but we should have no issues handling a couple of **youngsters**. The professor must have deemed it a false alarm after all."

"That'd be nice… still, that doesn't change the fact that getting caught would be really bad."

"Then come this way," Kouta gripped my hand and forcefully pulled me along. I didn't know where she was taking me, but it turned out to be behind the water tank. Once we stepped over the numerous pipes, she guided me to a small spot that couldn't be seen from the roof's entrance. "As long as we remain here, we should evade detection."

"Sure, they might not be able to spot us at a glance…but…"

I wouldn't call our hiding place spacious. By any estimate, it was only large enough to hide one person. Kouta was quite tall, and while I wasn't exactly on the larger side, I was still a grown man; there's no way the two of

us could hide here together.

"Of course we can."

Kouta laughed mischievously— that's when I knew exactly what was about to happen— with an abrupt tug, she pulled me in tight. From a third-party-perspective, it might appear as if she were giving me a hug, no, that's exactly what this was. She pressed our bodies together, wrapped her long arms around my back, and placed my chin on her right shoulder. Naturally, I could feel Kouta's breathing, her heartbeat, and her body heat. Naturally, she could also feel mine.

"This way we'll only take up one person's worth of space."

"—this might prove to be a problem." My arms had already been pinned, so I couldn't put up any resistance. "A very big problem."

"Do you dislike problems?"

"I tend to also hate solutions…"

"My-my, how innocent," Kouta chuckled. It was a decidedly suggestive laugh. "By the way, I have something to discuss with you. As I was searching for those MO disks, I tried looking around for anything we could use as a rope."

"And did you?" I asked, as I tried to stop my heart from pounding. Since the heart is an involuntary muscle, I obviously had no success. "Find a rope, that is?"

"I did not. There were plenty of computer cables and things of that nature, we weren't lacking in that department, but even if we strung them together, we'd never reach the Sixth Ward…Besides, if all the cables went missing, they'd surely know something was up."

"Fair point…"

Conveniently finding a rope capable of holding a person's weight in a place like this was likely a pipe dream to begin with. If we couldn't find a rope, then what about something rope-adjacent…? I tried to concentrate, but the scent of Kouta's hair distracted me. No, if anything these thoughts were what was distracting me from the scent of her hair. Calm down. Calm down. Think about something else.

"…Hair, huh… Kouta, what about hair?"

“I beg your pardon? What *about* hair?” Kouta said, pulling me in even tighter. Since Kouta was taller than me, this whole affair felt horribly infantilizing. Suzunashi also treated me like a child, but how should I put it, it felt completely different when she did it. “You’re not talking about *my* hair, are you?”

“Not at all…I’m talking about whether you could use hair as a makeshift rope?”

I’ve heard that hair is surprisingly sturdy. Of course, a single strand wouldn’t amount to much, but a couple thousand bundled together might make a good substitute. There’s also no shortage of incidents where hair has been used to strangle someone, so if I had to say whether it was possible or not—

“Ah, are you talking about Koutari then, *dear friend*?” Kouta spoke into my ear, almost like a whisper. I shivered. “I admit, he went full skinhead after a few mere words from you; there was no need for all that—”

Exactly. There’s no world in which my words should’ve held that much weight. Didn’t that suggest the reason he cut– no, shaved his long hair must’ve been something else. My mind wandered back to that blunt, taciturn researcher.

“‘For example— let’s say Koutari managed to successfully infiltrate the Seventh Ward using the same route we took. Then he murdered Utsurigi. After crucifying him to the wall, he tried to return only to realize the jump was impossible. What’s more, it was raining, so it was twice as impossible. Even so, he absolutely couldn’t afford to hang around the scene of the crime. That’s why he needed a rope–”

“And you’re saying he used his own hair?” Kouta said. “‘Tis reasonably consummate, but there’s a slight problem.”

“And that problem is?” Was it a larger problem than the fact you were currently stroking my thigh? “Tell me, Kouta.”

“First of all, none of the wards have any kind of fence or railings. Even if you were able to throw a rope across, there’d be nothing to snag it on. In order to snag it on the eavestrough, you would require some sort of hook. Secondly, there still remains the problem of distance.”

“The distance— you mean five metres? If he used a rope, I don’t think we’d need to take the angle into account.”

"Let's suppose Koutari's hair was a metre long. When I saw him from a distance, he did seem rather bushy, but even if you used all of it, once you divide it into five equal parts, it wouldn't have been able to hold a person's weight. No matter how skillfully he tied them, he would have only been able to cross four metres at most."

Five equal parts— four metres. That's right, in order to fashion it into a strong enough rope, you'd need to twist the strands together; there was also the issue of tying the knots. Of course it wouldn't reach five metres. Kouta was right, four metres looked like the limit. Even if we gave every benefit of the doubt imaginable— like Koutari's hair suddenly growing— and it managed to reach, there was still the first problem to contend with: there was no hook. Just when I'd come up with a suitably *psycho logical* deduction— even as I was at dire risk of losing my chastity!— it seemed like Koutari had simply chopped his hair off after all. How misleading could you get? If this were a mystery novel, I'd be tempted to call it unfair.

"And what about Jumping the distance…are we sure it's not possible somehow?"

"If you were amongst the world's best, I suppose it wouldn't be impossible. However, I don't think we shall find any average human capable of such a feat."

"Human…" That word stuck out to me. "…Then it might be possible for something inhuman, wouldn't it?"

"Huh?" Kouta replied incredulously. "What are you saying? It can't be. You aren't seriously suggesting our culprit is some kind of youkai, are you? Goodness… I don't particularly mind, but I wonder what the others would think if they heard you say that. Be careful who you share that with."

"Don't just immediately jump to youkai. It's not like people and youkai are the only two things that exist. There are plenty of other animals… like dogs for instance." I continued, my mind still racing. If I didn't keep up the momentum my concentration would start to waver. "It's not impossible that a large dog might be able to leap seven metres, right?"

"Are you talking about the three dogs in Kasugai's care?"

"I suppose I am. A so-called animal culprit theory." I nodded. When I did, my face was brought even closer to Kouta's body. Oh man. "…and even if that's wrong, I think I remember someone saying something about boars on this mountain… and if the boars can't make the jump…then…birds or something…"

"Are you sane? How can you rattle off so many preposterous ideas one after the other? I'm impressed." Kouta didn't sound impressed in the slightest. "So tell me, how would a dog murder Utsurigi? Or are you saying the dog managed to chop him up with a knife? 'Tis a remarkably fantastical theory, but don't you think it's a little far-fetched?"

"Maybe if you trained them, then… No, you're right. It's not possible after all." There was no chance I could win that argument, so I abandoned it all together. "…Shit. Are we still no closer to deciding the culprit…?"

"*'Deciding'*? Don't you mean *'deducing'*?"

"We can't just come up empty handed, so we've got to decide on one eventually, don't we? …More importantly, isn't this enough? Shito and Misachi must be long gone by now. They've gotta be."

I tried to un-contort myself from around Kouta, but she refused to let me go, saying, "We can't relax quite yet." But even if we couldn't relax, it had been ten or fifteen minutes since Shito and Misachi had entered the Seventh Ward—meaning I had spent the last ten or fifteen minutes in Kouta's arms— so it was likely safe to assume they had concluded it was a false alarm after all.

"Kouta, I-" "Shh"

Kouta forcefully silenced my protest. To be specific, she grabbed the back of my head and pressed my face into her shoulder so I couldn't speak. When I looked out past the water tank to see what was going on, the manhole cover that led to the roof had already begun to move slightly. Naturally, there was no reason an inorganic, non-mechanical, iron lid should be moving on its own—

"Shit! What's with this cover!? It's heavy as hell! Damnit! Who does he think I am, an Olympic weightlifter?!"

It was Shito's voice. I could hear it coming from the other side of the entrance. He seemed to be having trouble lifting the cover.

"—I never expected them to go out of their way to check the roof…" I lamented. "I guess they're being cautious…given the circumstances, I can't say I blame them…"

"'Tis only natural given the sudden disappearance of numerous MO disks,"

The thief said. That's right. The reason the alarm rang in the first place was because of Kouta's sticky fingers. In that case, the room she took them from was likely the first place they looked. If they noticed the disks were missing, then there's no way they'd chalk this up as a false alarm. Of course they'd perform a thorough sweep of the whole ward.

"You should have just put them back…"

"You can't exactly call yourself a first-rate thief if you give something back once you've stolen it, now can you? Come, squeeze in a little tighter. We shall be spotted."

*Squeeze*, Kouta's grip on me tightened as she attempted to force our bodies ever closer together. Naturally, we couldn't possibly get any *closer*, so all she effectively did was smush us together harder. If Shito spotted us like this, I'd be hard pressed to come up with an excuse. With that in mind, I wrapped my arms around Kouta's back as well. If I was to be found eating poison, I might as well finish the plate. I'd scarf down the table and chairs while I'm at it.

"My-my, how risqué, *dear friend*," Kouta smiled delightedly. "I must say, I don't find the thought utterly without appeal."

"Well, I do… so I'm begging you, please keep quiet…"

Apparently getting the hang of it, Shito finally managed to lift up the cover. He slowly dragged his small frame out of the hole and onto the roof.

"Ah– Shit, what a pain in the ass… Why am I stuck doing this when I'm so damn busy with everything else… It's ridiculous… it's not like we're actually gonna find an intruder… how would they even get in in the first place… there's a limit to how cautious you can be, Misachi…"

He grumbled to himself the entire time. It seems like Shito's the type who always talks to himself. This sparked a newfound sense of kinship within me. Especially the part where most of the things he said were complaints.

Shito sealed the manhole cover, and looked around where he stood.

"Not a soul…" Shito muttered. "Right side's clear. Left side too… God, I feel like an idiot…"

It didn't appear like Shito was planning on doing any kind of extensive search. In which case, we really had found the perfect hiding spot. Our hiding posture was still somewhat problematic, however. Oh man. I was

nearing my limit. Ahh. I was starting to get light-headed.

"And I haven't managed to get a hold of the Kunagisa Syndicate either… Honestly…" Shito continued his monologuing as he once again gripped the manhole cover. "What's gonna happen… I mean, why use such a cute girl as a lab rat? It's insane. Are you tryna make **another one like me**, professor? —What's craziest is tryna do that to one of the Kunagisa Syndicate's own."

The Kunagisa Syndicate… Hearing that, all the reason I lost came flooding back. While it sounds like things hadn't been smooth sailing, it seems like Professor Kyouichirou was proceeding exactly as Suzunashi, Neo, and Miss Kokoromi had predicted. However, that wasn't what caught my attention; Shito's tone was that of someone who still had some reservations. Shito was supposed to be someone unwaveringly sympathetic to the professor, so what happened?

That's when I remembered Neo's words. *'Ougaki and Uze have their reasons for looking up to the professor. Be it respect, or gratitude, or what have you. That's why, so long as you can offer them something greater, you're golden.'* It likely all came down to simple arithmetic. Add, subtract, multiply, and divide. At this very moment, Shito was probably wavering. Then– If that were true—

Suddenly, Shito paused as he was about to open the cover. Not only did he pause, but he was staring in our direction. Doubtfully, as if suspicious of something, Shito stared intensely at the water tank Kouta and I were hiding behind. Did he notice us? No, there's no way. In just a moment, he'll be on his way. There's no way he could have seen us. There's no way he could have seen us, and yet—

"Oi, is someone there?" Shito finally asked. "Is someone behind that tank?"

I almost let out an audible gasp, but Kouta muffled that too.

"If someone's there, then come on out!" Shito let go of the manhole cover and stood back up. "Jig's up, it's obvious someone's there! You hear me?! If you're not gonna come out, then I'm gonna come to you!"

"—I suppose there's no other option," Kouta said, reluctantly letting go of me. "Wait here, won't you?"

"Huh? Wait, hang o–"

"I'm coming out!"

Kouta yelled out to Shito. Then, in a whisper, she said, "until everything's over, don't come out no matter what." No sooner had she said that than she pushed me down, made her way around the tank, and stood out in the open where Shito could see her.

I didn't even have time to stop her.

Even if I did, I wouldn't have been able to find the words. After all, despite the horrible predicament we found ourselves in, the instant I saw her confident expression– an expression that seemed to say,*''tis nothing to worry about'*– I knew there were no words that could have stopped her to begin with.

"—Eh? I was right?" Shito's voice was dripping with confusion. "Wait… Hang on… Who the hell are you?"

"Shall I introduce myself?" Kouta smiled at him. "The name is Ishimaru Kouta. However, perhaps you know me better as Zerozaki Itoshiki."

"…The intruder from three days ago," Shito replied. "…What's this? That voice… you're a woman? You're massive… not as massive as the other one, though."

"Interested in women, are you, **boy**?" Kouta nonchalantly approached him. "How consummate."

"Don't move! I won't let you get away with this!"

"With what?" Kouta played dumb. "We can't converse without getting closer, now can we? That *is* the reason you called me out, is it not?"

"Shit- I said, don't move! —I'm warning you!"

Shito backpedaled as he spoke. There was no reason for him to retreat– it's just that– he was probably horrified. Kouta's presence felt utterly unknowable. It reminded me of our first meeting. It was overwhelming. Dreadfully overwhelming. Faced with that, it was all you could do not to crumble. That's why Shito was doing whatever he could to escape. It wasn't so much unconscious as it was instinctual.

"Oh-ho—" Kouta stopped her approach. Right next to the entrance. "If you don't care for conversation, then this is where I bid you farewell."

"! Oh no you don't!"

Shito launched himself at Kouta. His sense of duty must have won out over his sense of fear. However, while that may have been the right thing to do, I certainly wouldn't call it wise. Because it should have been obvious to Shito that Kouta, an *intruder* who'd already made herself known to him, never had any intention of fleeing. Her words were nothing more than a blatant provocation.

And having fallen for that provocation, Shito had already lost.

Kouta spun backwards, evading Shito's fist. Then, following through with her rotation, Kouta planted a long leg deep in Shito's gut. The spinning kick appeared more akin to taekwondo than something out of karate. There are numerous martial arts out there, but only taekwondo would have a move that involved turning your back on your opponent.

Despite Shito already having doubled over, Kouta showed no mercy. With her other leg— utilising yet another taekwondo move— she buried her heel in Shito's chest, forcefully righting his posture as he arched backwards. Then, utilising the momentum of yet another rotation, Kouta drove her fist into his right lung— A judo move this time.

"Gugh…gah!"

Unable to scream or even cry, he choked out more of a gasp. The instant that sound left his mouth, the battle was already decided. And yet Kouta wasn't done. She still didn't let up. An elbow strike to the stomach, a backhand to the heart, a knee strike to the solar plexus consummating in a leg sweep that brought Shito to the ground.

It was over before he could utter another cry. Shito seemed to have fainted. Although I suppose it's more accurate to say Kouta had simply beat him unconscious. The targeted strikes to his vital organs must have been for that very purpose. Of course, while I couldn't deny it had bought us a window to escape, I also couldn't deny how excessive it all felt.

"Kouta—"

I was about to step out from behind the tank when–

"Freeeeeeeeze!!!!"

The sudden explosion of anger, once again nailed me to the spot. I looked to see what was going on. There, aiming a handgun at Kouta, was Uze

Misachi. Still crouched beside Shito's collapsed body, Kouta looked somewhat surprised by Misachi's sudden appearance.

"Oh my- Then again, there were two of you, weren't there? — It completely slipped my mind."

"—Stay where you are, please— I won't hesitate to shoot."

The pistol gripped in her hands… It was a Jericho 941. Just as I thought. An Israeli clone of the CZ-75. A multi-caliber pistol capable of using both 9mm and 41AE bullets. If I remember correctly, the same company went on to reuse the design in manufacturing the much more famous Desert Eagle. I can't be positive because of my crummy memory, but one thing's for certain, the issue at hand had nothing to do with the make and model.

Given the classified nature of the facility's research, it wouldn't be strange for security to be armed— but this was way out there. Completely beyond the pale. Even if Kouta was capable of easily dispatching someone like Shito, if she had to go up against an armed opponent, then—

"—Pfft- Ahahahahah!"

And yet, Kouta's response was to burst out laughing. Then she leisurely rose as if she hadn't even noticed the gun. Her laughter was filled with scorn. She was mocking her.

"Ahaha-hahaha!"

"Is something funny!? Why are you laughing!? I'm telling you not to move!"

"That's exactly why I'm laughing, young lady." Kouta gazed down her nose at Misachi, who was roughly three heads shorter than her. "Look around, your partner's already down for the count. Yet despite threatening to shoot if I move, when I move anyway, you can't pull the trigger. How lukewarm. It's one thing to be cold, another to be hot-headed, but you're truly lukewarm. Even for minor characters who only exist to lose, to think you'd even try, it's just too funny—"

"Shut up! Stop talking!"

Misachi pointed the barrel at the sky and pulled the trigger. It served as both a means of intimidation, and as concrete proof that the gun really was loaded. Given how ear-splitting the gunshot was, it was safe to say the gun wasn't loaded with 9mm, but with 41AE. In other words, even in the best-case

scenario, there were still nine more bullets in the magazine. That was five less than if it were a 9mm, but that's hardly a worthwhile comparison. Nine shots were more than enough to kill one person— or even two.

"The next time you open that insolent mouth of yours, I'll shoot for real, intruder! Step away from Shito!"

"You tell me not to move, and then in the very same breath, you tell me to step away? Which is it, young lady?" Kouta smirked– continuing to make light of her opponent. "'Tis not consummate in the least. A young lady such as yourself for a secretary, and a simple-minded fool for an assistant, Professor Shadou Kyouichirou mustn't be all he's chalked up to be. Perhaps I needn't have bothered with the **roundabout** approach and should have merely waltzed straight in."

"Who are you calling young lady? Do you understand the situation you're in!? Don't think I won't do it—!"

"You think everyone will yield just because you have a gun? You think everyone will fall in line after a little show of strength? If so, then I was right to call you a young lady," Kouta said calmly, staring down Misachi— staring down the barrel of the gun. "If you think a toy like that is capable of killing someone, you're woefully mistaken. You don't also happen to believe you could take down a battleship with a spear, do you?"

"That's enough— Do you really think I'd miss at this distance?" Misachi tightened her grip on the pistol. "Things won't have to get ugly if you just comply."

"And wind up as one of the professor's **human** experiments? —Like this simple-minded fool over here?"

"Shut up!" Those words must have hit a nerve. "—What are you after? Why did you break in here!? Did another facility send you!?"

"—Let's talk possibilities." Kouta lowered her voice slightly, "Let's say the initial velocity of a bullet is nine hundred kilometres an hour. If so, how long would it take for that bullet to travel the two metres betwixt us?"

"…? …What are you talking about?"

"Possibilities, like I said. Now then, young lady, what's your answer?"

"… 0.08 seconds," Misachi answered dubiously. "…but what's your

point? That humans can't dodge bullets?"

"If those were the only numbers you had to contend with, then certainly. However—" Kouta pointed at Misachi. No, that's wrong. She was pointing at the gun in her hands. "—The Jericho 941. The trigger is 7.7 millimetres, which makes it a double action, does it not?"

"…? ……? Like I said, what's your point!?"

"Leave it to a young lady to immediately resort to hysterics. You're no different than those vapid airheads you find downtown, are you? 'Tis a double action, meaning pulling the trigger would require five kilograms of force. 'Twere it a single action, it would only require half as much. For a woman such as yourself, pulling the trigger would take a full half-second. And that's being generous."

"—? …!"

"And that's not all. It would take yet another 0.02 seconds for the hammer to fall. All in all, 0.6 seconds. Now then, everything thus far has merely been a measurement of how long it would take for the bullet to reach its target; however, we must also take into consideration the time it would take you to target it in the first place. In other words, how long it would take for you to line up your sights. Whether you're aiming at my head or my heart, it doesn't matter, the action required to ensure that 41 Action Express hits home would take a professional 0.1 seconds, but for an amateur such as yourself, the least you're looking at is 0.4 seconds… which brings us to a grand total of one second. A full second. That may as well be an eternity. At the very least, 'tis more than consummate enough to close a mere two metre gap."

"Don't mess with me! Even if I miss my first shot, I won't miss the second or third—"

"What's the point if each shot takes over a second, young lady? 'Twould be more expedient to just use your fists. 'Tis not everyday you have this kind of opportunity, so allow me to enlighten you: guns are weapons best used at range. Five metres would be the bare minimum, but what you really want is at least ten metres between you and your opponent. That way, no matter how quickly I move, all you would have to do is shift your aim a little and fire away. It might even be consummate to assert that, supposing you don't catch them by surprise, firearms are weapons that can only be used at range. Novices tend to be suckered in by the allure of power. However, a one-hit-kill weapon is pointless if you never manage to hit anything with it."

"Sh-Shut Up!"

Misachi pulled the trigger. This time, aiming at Kouta.

A loud shot rang out— and that was it. Just like with Shito, Kouta spun out of the trajectory of the bullet, and then, in the same motion, she closed the gap between them, thrusting the heel of her palm up into Misachi's jaw. Misachi was lifted off the ground. The instant Misachi's body was liberated from gravity, the entirety of Kouta's considerable strength, concentrated into an elbow strike, crashed down on her.

The chain of events was hard to describe. It felt entirely different than when she had faced off against Shito. That's right, it was more like a terribly efficient, beautiful—wave.

Misachi's body slid and tumbled across the rooftop— it reminded me a little of a curling stone— stopping just before it tumbled over the ledge. She didn't make any attempt to stand up, nor did she groan in pain. Kouta approached, confirmed she was unconscious, and then picked up the handgun.

"—'Tis safe to come out now, *dear friend*."

"……" I stepped out from behind the water tank. "…… Well done."

"Hehe…" Kouta playfully pointed the Jericho in my direction. "Bang! Ahahah-!"

"……"

"Oh my, you seem displeased."

"No, not really… It's just, did you have to take it so far…?" I said, glancing at the two people collapsed on the floor. "Also, you were way too reckless. I can't believe you provoked someone holding a gun…"

"Had I not provoked her, I would have been shot."

"I guess. …does that mean everything you said was a lie?"

"I'd prefer you think of it as a means to an end,"

Kouta said with a smile, tossing me the Jericho. I caught it, wondering why she couldn't have at least switched the safety on first. It

weighed heavy in my hands. It was only natural. The Jericho weighed over a kilogram. Holding this thing at arm's length for any considerable amount of time would be difficult even for a man like myself. That's why—that's why, for Misachi it must've been–

Essentially, that's what it came down to. Kouta's harsh diatribe had merely been a ploy to buy time. She had actually been waiting for Misachi's arms to tire. To tire to the point where she could no longer aim properly. Her loss of fine motor skill was obvious, even from the sidelines.

"Novices tend to be suckered in by the allure of numbers and logic—I suppose."

If you let yourself get fooled by numbers, you're in for a rough time — was how Kunagisa had put it.

"Indeed. I don't actually know the Jericho's bullet velocity," Kouta nodded. "Hold onto that for me, will you? I'm sure you already know how to use it. I could carry it as well, but guns are not to my liking. They feel a little unfair."

"…Unfair, huh…?" As she spoke, I switched the safety on and hung the Jericho from my belt. It felt a little uneven, but I couldn't think of any other way to carry it. "But what will you do now? Now they know you're here."

"That is consummate in its own right. After all… if there's an *'outsider'*, that lessens the suspicion in Kunagisa, does it not?

"Sure, that's good for me, but what about you…"

"I don't concern myself with such things. In fact, there is nothing that could cause me concern. Besides…" Kouta made her way towards where Shito was lying. "It appears we've just found our means of escape."

# DAY TWO (5) - COLLAR TALE

## 0

*It's easy to trick a genius.*
*It's hard to trick an idiot.*
*It's impossible to trick a pig.*

## 1

By the time I returned to Neo's private quarters, roughly an hour and a half remained. Neo and Kouta were in a separate room discussing what came next — In all likelihood, what *came next* would have nothing to do with Kunagisa and I— so I was all alone. Surrounded by paintings, I didn't utter a word; I just sat on the sofa.

The ticking of my watch was deafening. If I had known this was going to happen, I would have worn my digital one. That said, Kunagisa's tinkering had turned my other watch into something unthinkable. Besides, this analogue watch was a gift from Hime, which brought with it a sense of obligation, so I suppose I never really had a choice to begin with.

"A choice, huh— Wouldn't that be nice?"

To choose.

The act of choosing.

I pulled Misachi's Jericho from out of my belt and tried aiming down its sights. My form was that of a complete amateur. However— so long as I didn't lose my cool like Misachi did— handling it didn't seem all that difficult. There was no need for any formal training, I could get used to aiming it with just a little practice.

"This country sure is peaceful, isn't it…"

The *'means of escape'* Kouta mentioned should be blindingly obvious. First, she dragged Misachi and Shito inside and tied the still-unconscious Misachi up with a computer cable. Even if she hadn't, it likely would have taken her half the day to wake up, but it didn't hurt to be cautious, or so she insisted. If you're wondering what we did with Shito, Kouta tossed

him to me (literally) and I slung him over my shoulder.

"Why should a woman have to do all the heavy lifting, did they not teach you morals?"

"I'm a feminist. I believe men and women should be treated equally."

"Then 'tis only right you should carry him, *dear friend*." Kouta smirked. "Men and women being equal, 'tis abundantly clear which of us is in charge."

It was.

The reason Kouta had me carry Shito obviously wasn't out of consideration for him. Essentially, Ougaki Shito's role was to act as a *key*. We used his unconscious body to pass the retina scanner. He also had his key card on him, and I'd heard his ID number many times by this point, so I was able to memorize it. I couldn't quite remember if it was ikwe9f2ma444 and ikwe9mada423, but when Kouta pressed me for an answer, I somehow managed to come up with something. The same went with the password. There was still some level of uncertainty (if only Kunagisa were here), but it seems like I had gotten it right. That said, the ID number and password felt almost incidental when it came to a security system like this. What really mattered was the key card, the retina scan— and the voice recognition. Essentially, everything that proved you were who you said you were. We were in the clear when it came to the card and the retina scan, but none of that mattered without his voice. And there was no way we could coax him to speak while he was still unconscious—

"Ougaki Shito. ID: ikwe9f2ma444."

Kouta said, **completely changing** her voice.

"Voice and retina scan confirmed. Please wait,"

The synthesized voice responded, and the door slid open.

"What's with the surprised look? 'Tis not as if Aikawa Jun has a monopoly on vocal mimicry, now does she?" Kouta gloated. "Even I'm capable of tricking machinery. Especially when that machinery is as consummately rudimentary as **this**."

"You know Aikawa?"

Kouta looked a little bothered by my question, but she quickly shook

it off and said, “I’ve only heard the rumours. When you mentioned that contractor back in the stairwell, I pretty much surmised that it was the infamous Aikawa Jun— ‘Twere it her, she wouldn’t just be able to deceive machines, but the gods themselves. Now then, if we don’t hurry up, the door will close. Ah, you can just leave Shito where he is. With his arms and legs bound, he won’t be getting up to much.”

This time, it was Shito and Misachi who were the ones locked up. If they weren't, they would report everything about Kouta to the professor, and while that was bound to happen eventually, I wanted to delay it for the time being. When the two of them don’t return, the professor will undoubtedly grow suspicious and be forced to take action. Still, the reprieve should last at least until the time limit is up. Perhaps that’s just wishful thinking, but either way, that’s how Kouta and I managed to escape the Seventh Ward.

“……”

—but I had some doubts.

After meticulously infiltrating the facility, going so far as to deceive them into thinking she had already left, why would Kouta— a crafty, conniving, and cunning veteran such as Kouta— lose sight of her goal over a few MO disks (regardless of how vital the *data* they contained was!) and trip the alarm? And while I’m at it, setting aside Misachi and her pistol, Kouta had also launched into a long-winded speech with the unarmed (and clearly outmatched) Shito as well. Suppose that was just to keep Shito talking so she could accurately mimic his voice—

How terrifying. What was even more terrifying was not the act itself (—If that’s all it was, then Aikawa Jun would’ve been able to pull it off too; likewise, Kunagisa would’ve been able to devise a way out as well), but the audacity to pull it off with such nonchalance. Even her most ardent defender would have to admit her chances of success weren't all that high. If Misachi had simply run away, we’d have been finished. And that’s assuming more people didn’t show up in the first place. Countless other faults with her plan kept popping up one after the other. The most fatal of which was relying on my (MY!) memory. If it was a plan I’d come up with, it would, without a doubt, put the *‘fool’* in *‘fool’s errand’*. In hindsight, this kind of heroic bravado often appears like *the one viable means*, but this time around, I just couldn’t bring myself to think that way. It was nearly as bad as risking– no, *throwing away* my life by jumping to the Seventh Ward; there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that it was a terrible idea.

“……”

But Kouta's scheme had been a great success, and so, here I was.

Once we got outside, Kouta contacted Neo via wireless transceiver, so he feigned hospitality, stepping outside to seeing off his visitor, Kasugai (whom he had invited in the first place), so he could let the two of us in on his way back inside.

In the end, Kouta was convinced of her success, and I was not. It wasn't even a matter of weighing the risks; I couldn't have come up with such an extreme plan in the first place.

"—I suppose that's the difference between completion and perfection…"

The difference between what can be seen, and what can't. Utsurigi's crucifixion must've also been something of that nature. The killer had seen something that was invisible to an ordinary person like me, and the dissection and mutilation of his body, the theft of his arms, and the scrawled bloody message, all of it had to have meant something.

"…One hour and twenty-five minutes left…"

Or as *Dead Blue* would say, One hour twenty-four minutes forty-six seconds and seventy-seven milliseconds. But if I hadn't come up with anything after thinking about it for the last two and a half hours, another hour and a half wasn't likely to make any difference. Being pessimistic wouldn't resolve anything either, but my thoughts had taken an unavoidable turn for the worse.

"Shiogi— if you were in my place, even in the worst situation, even under the worst conditions, I wonder if you could still come up with some brilliant tactic."

Well, since it's you we're talking about, I'm sure you'd make it work somehow.

But there's no hope for me.

I could never be a tactician like you.

Let's give it a shot- let's try to force ourselves to come up with something– Something enticing enough to get one over on Professor Kyouichirou. That's right, for instance— what about the one helping me with all this, Ishimaru Kouta? Couldn't **she be the culprit**?

You've got to admit that it's possible. After all, the professor didn't know about her existence, and the only person on the inside who knew was the unscrupulous Neo (I suppose we can add Shito and Misachi to that list as well now). Besides, unlike the faculty members, she wasn't locked up inside one of the wards. In other words, she only had one obstacle, which was one less than the other suspects. And with the cunning, knowledge, and judgement she just displayed, she could've pulled off Utsurigi's murder and arranged it to appear like an impossible crime all before her morning tea—

"…What dreadful nonsense."

My forced hypothesis was met with forced rejection. You could only go so far off the rails. I didn't want to hand it to him, but compared to my theory just now, Professor Kyouichirou's Kunagisa culprit theory seemed far more credible. Jesus, what a strange thing to praise him for.

"Then, assuming the same goes for Neo as well… that only leaves me with one more bizarre theory…"

That being the possibility that **I** was the culprit. As Kunagisa's attendant, I followed her here just so I could murder Utsurigi– wouldn't that be a neat twist? But while it might've been neat, it was utterly meaningless. I knew I wasn't the killer, and despite harboring no small amount of ill will for the man, I never had any intention of killing him.

However,

In this case, **what actually happened** didn't matter. All that was important was what was **perceived to have happened**. As long as it was suitably logical, then—

"Stop being so stupid,"

I muttered, setting my sights on the room's phone. I owned a cell phone, but I had left it back at the antique apartment. The satellite phone that Kunagisa used (the one taken by Professor Kyouichirou) might've worked, but there was no way mine would've gotten a signal this deep in the mountains. However, phone companies were bound by law; no matter where you were, so long as you were in Japan (be it an isolated island, or the heart of an undeveloped mountain range), if you make a request, they are required to set up a telephone line. As such, even Shadou Kyouichirou's research facility was connected to an outside network, which is why Neo had a telephone in his room.

Then it hit me. Normally, these kinds of organizations had a phone

operator to connect calls, or some kind of internal network, so you couldn't directly contact outside, but this facility only hired a select few, so it was entirely unlikely they would hire any superfluous staff. Meaning this phone likely connected directly to the outside. By the time I reached that conclusion, I was already standing in front of the phone with the receiver in my hand.

Halfway through dialing the first number, I stopped and placed the receiver down again. Thinking about it carefully, it was likely unreasonable to expect to be able to talk with her over the phone. When she doesn't want to speak, she doesn't, and even when she does want to speak, she still doesn't; even if she were to listen to everything I have to say, she doesn't follow any orders besides her mistress', and even then, she had a remarkable talent for not listening to those either. Thinking again, who's to say she would even be the one to pick up the phone. Worst case scenario, it's even possible that it could be that nutty fortune-teller. What the hell would that clairvoyant even have to say about all this? Just the thought of it made me want to vomit blood.

"On the other hand, Miiko's probably not home… and she doesn't own a cellphone."

Besides, Miiko's instincts were as sharp as the legendary blade, Onimaru Kunitsuna, so it's not impossible she already sensed that Suzunashi and Kunagisa were locked up. Given Miiko's impulsive personality, that wouldn't be a welcome development. Once I was done agonizing over who to call, I finally decided to dial Hime's cellphone number.

"Hello hello?" Before the dial tone even rang for the second time, Hime's listless, yet perceptibly nervous, voice came through the receiver. "Who am I speaking to?"

"A man hellbent on world domination."

"Ahh, master, hiya!" Hime sounded relieved, the nervousness in her voice dissipating. "You spooked me with the call from an unknown number, master. Whazzup? Aren'tcha in the middle of a vacation in Nagoya prefecture?"

"Yeah, something like that," I answered, but Nagoya wasn't a prefecture, was it? And if it were, had I ever been? I don't think so, but Nagoya prefecture did ring a bell. "Right now, I'm, well…I'm calling from my room."

"Hmm, that explains the unknown number then. Ahh, that's right! This is perfect! There's something I forgot to tell you, master!"

"What?"

"Souvenirs! I want you to buy me five blocks of uirō-mochi!"

"Huh? Did you always have such a sweet tooth?" I said, trying to remember if uirō-mochi was even sweet to begin with. Ah, that's right. This was Aichi prefecture. Nagoya was a city here. Nagoya prefecture must've just been a slip of the tongue. "…Uirō-mochi is that soft desert made of red bean paste, agar, and sugar, isn't it? Do you really like that stuff, Hime?"

"Nope, but my friends do. Don't you remember? I introduced you, didn't I? Usagi and the others. Uirō-mochi came up when I mentioned you were going to Nagoya, but I completely forgot. I don't need any, but five should be enough for my pals. If you can, get a bunch of different colours. You've been leaching tons of money off me, so you should be able to afford it, right?"

"Don't start spouting stuff that'll ruin my image… but sure, if I manage to make it back alive, forget five, I'll buy you five hundred."

"I'll pass. This isn't Dazai's *Yam Gruel*."

"*Yam Gruel* was by Akutagawa,"

I gave a suitably master-like answer.

"Was it? Wait, hang on, master? *'If I make it back alive'*? You make it sound like you might not."

"Who knows. Where you find people, you find graves; if you flip that around, then it shouldn't be too surprising to think that people could die just about anywhere." That's right, it's not surprising at all. Especially in the case of someone like me. "Well, in the case I don't come back, you can do whatever you want with my things."

"Really?" Hime's voice lit up. Then I can keep your weird T-shirts, your weird jeans, your weird jackets, and your weird socks!?"

"Don't call people's clothes weird…" and what are you planning to do with my socks? "But sure. In exchange, you'll be responsible for clearing out my apartment. That includes moving the furniture and all the other bulky stuff."

"Whaaat?" Hime deflated immediately. She was far too self-serving. "Wait, are you for real, master? You're not in trouble, are you? Are you under

attack by terrorists? Did they crash a plane into your building, or maybe a submarine?"

"Nah, not this time… but I guess it's something similar."

"Hmm," Hime didn't seem happy with my explanation.

"For someone so smart, master's kinda stupid, huh?" Despite her age, Hime spoke like she knew everything. "I may be dumb, but I'm not stupid. That's why I can tell just how troubled you are right now, master."

"Really? That's reassuring. Does that mean you'll help me?"

"Nope. Class is about to start."

What a banal reason.

"Ah, that's right…you're at school right now." I said, checking the time on the watch she gave me. "You shouldn't be bringing your cellphone to class, you know."

"Yeah, yeah. I know, master." Along with Hime's voice, a distant chime could be heard through the phone. "Oh, looks like that's the bell. I've gotta hang up now, master."

"Yeah, see you."

As the person who called, it was only polite that I hung up first. Now that some of the weight was lifted off my shoulders, I felt exhausted. I sighed so deeply that I may have emptied my lungs in their entirety before returning to the sofa.

This is fine.

Isn't it?

I, an individual who had honestly and sincerely never once had faith in himself, had no self-confidence to speak of. That hadn't meant I lied to Kouta a couple hours ago, it's just that my life had been nothing but a litany of failures, decidedly stained by regret and remorse. And that's why. When I fail, when regret and remorse are all I've got left, it's best not to have any unfinished business.

Now that the loose ends were tied up.

I was free to do as I liked.

"…It might be smart to head back to the cage and talk to Kunagisa…"

No one fits the term 'remote-operation type' better. Shut up in her mansion, unable to even take the stairs on her own. And yet, whether it be world affairs or academic pursuits, Kunagisa's knowledge was all encompassing (not as all encompassing as Chee-kun's, mind you). If I were to **input** the data I collected over the past two and a half hours, she should be able to spit out some unforeseen solution.

That said, given that Kasugai had already returned to the Fourth Ward, going back would carry its own risks. I don't think Kasugai would use the stairwell, so I would be in the clear at first, but given the fact that any slip-up would be my last, I had no choice but to be cautious.

"Is it even worth worrying over…?"

"At least Hime's in class," I muttered something anyone else would find utterly incoherent as I made to leave the room. For now, I should talk things over with Kouta. However, before I even had a grip on the doorknob, the door swung open. Huh? Was this another automatic door? I haven't had the pleasure of laying eyes on one, but I've heard tales of automatic doors that didn't just slide open sideways— but no, I don't remember this door being anything that high-tech. All this to say, someone must be trying to enter the room. That someone being Kouta, standing in the hallway with her eyes wide in surprise at finding me directly in front of her.

"—My, what seems to be the matter, *dear friend*? 'Tis an odd place to stand."

"No, I just figured I'd go back and check on the cage… I wanted to hear Kunagisa and Suzunashi's opinions on all this. I can't pretend it's not risky though, so I was waffling about what to do."

"Well, 'tisn't a bad idea," Kouta said. "In fact, it may be ideal."

"Ideal how? By the way, Kouta, are you done talking with Neo?"

"Our talk isn't concluded so much as on hold," she said ambiguously. "We're taking a short recess. It appears we'll be having an unexpected guest. Neo received a call from Koutari just now about some business they need to attend to, and 'tis not as if I'm about to let him see me. They intend to use this room, so I've been sent to retrieve you."

"Huh."

……Koutari, eh?

The Koutari-culprit theory I conjured up out of pure desperation (desperate in more ways than one), once again sprang to mind. Kouta had flatly rejected my suggestion that he had fashioned his hair into some kind of rope, but that didn't necessarily clear him of all suspicion. It was still possible that he had murdered Utsurigi by some other means– as possible as it was for any other researcher at least. Regardless, it didn't seem like Koutari and Gaisuke were on good terms— now that I mention it, Utsurigi didn't seem to be on good terms with anyone.

"Not a soul— ……but why?" The doubt captured my attention. "I figured he would've got on perfectly fine with Miss Kokoromi…"

"Utsurigi may have distanced himself from others deliberately," Kouta said. "You would know for certain if you just asked Kunagisa about it, would you not? But then again, Kunagisa hardly seems keen on talking about him."

"Can't be helped. She's completely tactless after all. She's loose-lipped, but it's either all or nothing, nothing in-between. She seems to have a tough time judging how much she can get away with sharing. The criteria are too fuzzy for her."

"How Boolean. Or perhaps I should say, how blue."

"She's definitely both."

I stepped out of the room and into the hallway where Kouta stood. There, the first half-decent idea I had popped into my head. Naturally, we couldn't let ourselves get spotted by Koutari, but thinking about it another way, didn't that mean we could do whatever we wanted so long as that wasn't the case? From an information-gathering perspective, I certainly had plenty I wanted to ask him. And since I couldn't ask him directly, then I might as well —

"Kouta,"

"Understood."

Without me even having to say anything, Kouta reached into her coat and pulled out a wireless transceiver. It was even smaller than a cell phone with an exceptionally slim design. Rather than any buttons, it had four-or-so dials that Kouta began readjusting. She had used the same device to contact Neo earlier, but still, as expected of a thief, she had all kinds of secret gadgets.

“Yes— Precisely, Neo. If you would be so kind.”

It only took two or three sentences for Neo and Kouta to come to an understanding— or rather, to come to an agreement.

“Well then, let us bide our time on the roof. Another room might be adequate as well, but should the worst come to pass and Koutari opens the door on some whim, it shall be over for us in one fell-swoop.”

“Right…” the roof again? “But how will we eavesdrop from the roof?”

“That’s what this transceiver is for. If we set it to receive only, then they shan't be able to hear us on their end. That said, ‘tis not as if there’s no cause for concern; there always remains the possibility of someone somewhere picking up on the radio waves and exposing us… although the chances of that happening are so slim ‘tis not worth fretting over.”

Kouta said as she began making her way towards the stairwell that connected to the roof.

“If there’s anything to fret over, it would have to be those two.”

“You mean Shito and Misachi?” I asked, following up the stairs behind her. “It’d take them half the day just to wake up, wouldn’t it? Given all the needless pummeling you did, I mean.”

“Dear-o-dear. ‘Tis not consummate at all to deliberately paint others as sadists. I never use any more force than is absolutely necessary.”

“Misachi’s one thing, but I still think you went a little too hard on Shito. You deliberately aimed for his organs. If you just went for the head, you could have knocked him out in one blow, couldn’t you? It’s gonna hurt a hell of a lot when he wakes up.”

“Keep on talking and you shall find out just how kind I was being,”

Kouta threatened vaguely. Reaching the top of the stairs, Kouta opened the door, stepped out onto the roof, laid down her jacket and took a seat. I followed suit and sat grasping my knees facing her. Kouta began to fiddle with the transceiver’s frequency.

“…Now that I think about it, despite all the alarms, this place doesn’t have any security cameras, does it?” I said off-handedly. “That’s awfully convenient for the two of us, but from a security perspective, isn’t that a

problem?"

"Perhaps. However, from a management perspective, 'tis far more consummate," Kouta answered without looking up from the transceiver. "Besides, I'm sure there are things they would rather not have recorded as well. Take those MO disks from earlier, while they may have been fairly valuable in their own right, twasn't any of the good stuff. That sort of thing."

"So, any and all records were kept in their heads…?"

Wasn't the strict security more than enough?

Kouta appeared to have finished tuning the receiver, and placed it on the roof between us. I could hear the rustling of clothes. Neo must've had his receiver in a pocket or something.

"Hmm– The signal's a tad weak."

Kouta tilted her head as she adjusted a dial ever so slightly. When she did, something resembling a human voice leaked out of the transceiver.

"Not at…ll…outari."

"I don't care."

"Be that as it may, you're a little late. That's unusual for someone who's usually so punctual, Koutari."

"It's because the elevator's busted for some reason."

It was Neo and Koutari's voices. Since the two of them didn't sound like they were walking and talking, it seemed that they were in Neo's painting-adorned private quarters after all.

"…So, what did you want to see me for, Koutari?"

"A research matter, of course."

Then the two of them launched into a conversation full of technical lingo (such-and-such efficiency, and the what-have-you circuits— that kind of jargon). At first, I tried to listen carefully, but there's nothing more boring than hearing people ramble on about things you don't even understand. While it might be rude to admit, I was slowly losing all interest in what they had to say.

"…this feels like a complete waste of effort," Kouta muttered

disinterestedly. She must've been feeling the same way. "Not that it was much effort at all, mind you. How can they prattle on about something so dull? Do they really find it that interesting?"

"At least you can understand them somewhat, can't you? To me, it may as well be another language."

"'Tis because I can understand it that I find it so boring," Kouta said. "How dreadful does it have to be for it to be boring both when you understand it and when you don't?"

"I can't shake the feeling we're wasting our time… just get to the incident already, Neo."

"It would seem far too unnatural to bring that up so suddenly. He has his own affairs to be concerned about as well, you know. At the very least, he can't go blowing his cover over something like this."

"Yeah, I get that but…… then can I leave this to you, Kouta?" I stood up. "While you handle things here, I'm gonna head back to the cage and check on Kunagisa."

"Splitting up, are we? 'Tis hardly consummate to saddle me with such a menial task, but I suppose it can't be helped this time. There's still the matter of the deadline after all."

I glanced at my watch. Only an hour and fifteen minutes left.

"Ah… but if taking Shito and Misachi out of the equation distracts them, …the professor's confusion might buy us a little more time."

"And it might just as well do the opposite," Kouta said, glancing at me as she righted her crooked cap. "The two they sent to check on the Seventh ward never returned. 'Twould clearly invite suspicion. Still, supposing the professor trusts them, 'tis far more likely he assumes they can handle whatever happens, and that they are only performing an extra thorough sweep given the situation."

"Not so sure about trust… but conviction, maybe," I said, remembering something. Namely, what it was that Kouta had mentioned as she faced off against Misachi. "By the way Kouta, what was that all about?"

"*That*, being?" Kouta deliberately avoided giving an answer. "I don't recall us being close enough to pick up on what the other's saying without any context. Or could it be that you desire such intimacy, *dear friend*."

"Don't dodge the question. You mentioned something about Shito when you were talking to Misachi. About how you didn't want to *'wind up as one of the professor's* ***human experiments****'* like that *'simple-minded fool,'*"

I said, trying to mimic Kouta's cynical delivery. I thought I hadn't done a half-bad job of it, but Kouta looked exceptionally uncomfortable for some reason. I cleared my throat before continuing, "what did you mean by that?" forcefully righting the conversation.

"I meant nothing by it at all. 'Twould be consummate to take it at face value," Kouta gave a brusque answer, her spirits seemed to have fallen considerably. "In short, just like Utsurigi Gaisuke, Ougaki Shito is one of his lab rats. Although, in his case, there are plenty of replacements lined up, so 'tisn't quite right to imply they are the same. However, one thing's for certain, that boy is something extraordinary."

"Something extraordinary…?"

She was probably right. Since arriving, Shito hadn't shown me anything too brilliant, but it wasn't impossible that that was only because he hadn't had the chance to. The fact that he could make a life for himself in a facility like this was more than enough proof that he was capable.

However, if the *human experiments* Kouta mentioned were as I thought they were, then wouldn't that take on a somewhat different connotation. To wind up the professor's guinea pig, nothing more than a research subject. In other words,

"He's **manufacturing geniuses—** don't you agree?" With her ear still lent to the transceiver, Kouta spoke in a somewhat playful tone. "But why don't we leave that conversation 'till everything's concluded. How Ougaki Shito came to live here and what kind of role he plays has nothing at all to do with Kunagisa Tomo or Utsurigi Gaisuke. Even you can see that, can you not?"

I wonder. I didn't get it. It was yet another thing I didn't get. Just like everything else. I didn't understand it at all.

Then, at that moment.

The sound of Koutari's voice coming through the transceiver seized my thoughts.

"Neo. About this incident."

## 2

"Neo. About this incident. What do you think?"

"It hardly matters what I think— Besides, I have next to no opinion on it to begin with. Other than the fact that it's landed us in some hot water, that is. With Utsurigi dead, it may as well be curtains for us. Then again, the professor seems to have something up his sleeve."

"That blue-haired girl, you mean?"

"Exactly, that is precisely what I mean. Say what you will, but she's the former leader of *Cluster*. As far as **raw materials** go, she's even better than Utsurigi. And she's not even twenty. She would be far more pliable and easier to work with as well, don't you think?"

"She doesn't look easy to work with to me."

"Perhaps. If she were all alone, then you'd be right. However, it seems you're forgetting the two acquaintances of hers we have hostage, Koutari."

"Hostage? Is that what they are?"

"It is. The lady in black aside— the two of them don't appear to be all that close— the lad is always a handy card to have at our disposal. And it seems we got our hands on an ultra rare card at that— the lover of a direct descendent of the Kunagisa house. It may not be too valuable, but it's rare all the same."

"You're right. I don't get it myself, but it seems like the blue-haired girl is head over heels for the brat."

"Certainly. That said, according to the professor she has no emotions to speak of. He said her genius was like interfacing directly with a machine. Still, from an outsider's perspective— or at the very least, from mine— she doesn't look all that special. She doesn't even seem all that smart. If anything, the lady in black seems far brighter."

"Smart people always look dumber than they are… You shouldn't judge a book by the cover."

“You’ve got a point, Koutari. And trust me, I’m aware; I’ve heard more than enough about Lady Kunagisa’s skills through the grapevine, after all. That’s why I can’t say I don’t understand why the professor’s willing to go through all this effort to frame her.”

“It’s not framing if she actually ends up being the culprit.”

“You’re still on about that? Still, I suppose you’re right. The professor’s version of events isn’t wholly unbelievable. That said, it won’t be easy to prove it, now will it?”

“There’s no need.”

“You may be right. There’s no need to go through the grueling process of establishing guilt if you just assert it hard enough. But then the problem becomes how to deal with the Kunagisa Syndicate. Or perhaps I should say ‘how to *strike* a deal with the Kunagisa Syndicate’— it’s more or less the same either way. When they hear that one of their own is being used as a prototype, I’m sure they won’t stay quiet.”

“If we get her to claim she consented to it, we should be fine.”

“So just like Utsurigi then, huh? That wouldn’t be a bad idea, but how would we get her to do it?”

“Did you forget what we just talked about? You were the one who brought it up in the first place."

“Ah yes, the hostages. I see. Hmm— not a bad plan. Not bad at all.”

“It’s the same strategy we used on the pervert, so you can’t exactly call it inspired.”

“The pervert? Ah, you mean Utsurigi? I suppose you’re right. But, it’s not as if creativity is high on the docket when it comes to these things. We’re academics, not artists. Still, unlike with Utsurigi, the solutions already laid out for us— that being taking the lad hostage. In other words, locking up Lady Kunagisa means locking up the lad as well. Am I wrong?”

“You aren’t. But we should consider that a blessing.”

“Oh-ho? And how do you figure that, exactly?”

“That blue-haired girl isn’t able to see reality. It doesn’t matter where she is, it’s all the same. In other words, she’s everywhere and nowhere at the

same time."

"I never had you pegged for a poet, Koutari. Ah, pardon me, I didn't mean to interrupt. As you were."

"Essentially, whether she's at home or here at the facility, it doesn't matter. So long as that brat is **by her side**."

"Aha- Now I get it. I see what you mean. In that case, the Seventh Ward would become their little love-nest. Then again, they'd be under 24/7 surveillance, so I doubt it'd be all that pleasant. Still, it's not half-bad."

"For her, at least."

"Ah, right. I doubt Lady Kunagisa is all it'd take to keep the ER Program drop-out complacent. Then again, he's hard to get a grasp on, so I can't say anything too insightful about him."

"You can grasp him just fine. You just wind up grasping so much it's hard to make heads-or-tails of it."

"Alright, I concede. You're exactly right. Leave it to Koutari, the depths of your insight know no bounds! —Hmph, even with Lady Kunagisa madly in love with him, the problem is the lad himself. I wonder what the professor plans to do about that. He's completely unaffiliated with the Kunagisa Syndicate, so if he were to disappear, surely his friends and family would kick up a fuss."

"He doesn't look like the type with many friends to me."

"You could say that. He seems talkative and charming enough, but maybe it's his fear of human contact that made him that way— or at least that might be a psychologist's perspective, but I fear it probably has to do with something far deeper in the lad's case. There's something elusive about him. In that sense, you could say he's similar to Lady Kunagisa and Utsurigi. The only thing scarier than those who're capable of anything, are those you can't predict. All the more so since he's so young. In any case, modern society hasn't grown so apathetic that someone up and vanishing wouldn't draw any attention."

"Is that right? I wouldn't be so sure."

"Well, I suppose you have a point. After all, that Prowler case in Kyoto– Lady Kunagisa's home town– still hasn't been solved, and the world may be rife with danger, but that alone doesn't mean—"

"Neo. Rather than that brat, I'm more worried about the woman you call the *'lady in black'*."

"Oh? And why is that? Let's see– If I remember correctly— her name was Suzunashi. Suzunashi Neon."

"Exactly. What do you suppose he'll do with her? Professor Kyouichirou, that is."

"Ah– One hostage is more than enough, isn't it? That said, if he wants to keep everything under wraps, he can't just send her on her merry way. But if he keeps her here, then he'll run into the same problem he will with the lad. Namely, her friends and family causing a stink."

"Didn't the professor do an investigation? He should've already performed a background check."

"Now that you mention it, he told me he did. Although, since he didn't have a lot of time, the data he pulled wasn't exactly thorough. In fact, we didn't know the lad was an ER Program participant until Miyoshi was kind enough to tell us. We're not the ones with access to *Cluster*'s monstrously talented seeker, after all. Besides, given how confidential the ER3 System is, that should have been obvious even without me having to tell you. And— there was one more thing. I can't quite remember what it was though."

"—Well *I* looked into it. It's unbelievable."

"Unbelievable? What is? The lad's history?"

"No. Suzunashi Neon's."

"Oh? And why is that? Now I'm curious."

"That's actually what I came here to discuss. I'll tell you the specifics later, but continuing to keep that woman locked up is an extraordinarily bad idea."

"A worse idea than locking up the lad and Lady Kunagisa, you mean? If so, that doesn't sound like a pleasant conversation."

"It's to the point where I'm hesitating over whether to even bring it up to the professor. After all, the only thing on *The Mad Daemon*'s mind is how to get his hands on that blue-haired girl. If things go badly, we might get dragged down with him."

“Dragged down, eh? That’s it, Koutari! I just had a brilliant idea for if that happens! Tell me what you think about this: Essentially, the two of us would work together to find Utsurigi’s real killer. It could be just like a shounen manga, the two of us could both point them out and cry, *‘The culprit was you, all along!’* After all, you and I have always made a pretty good team.”

“We have not.”

“Is that so? A shame, then. Still, as a matter of practicality, what do you think? Do you think Lady Kunagisa’s actually the culprit?”

“Who knows. At this point it doesn’t really matter who the culprit is.”

“Is that right— I suppose it is. It might not make a difference. Still, murder is unthinkable. To think that a monster like that could be walking around this facility, what can I say, it makes me shudder.”

“*‘Kill one man, and you are a murderer. Kill millions of men, and you are a conqueror. Kill them all, and you are a god.’* — The words of Jean Rostand.”

“Darn. You beat me to it. Still, he might be right. If you think about it, killing Utsurigi may as well be the same as killing millions. They killed the countless people who were meant to **follow in his footsteps**. Then again, they also say *‘one death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic.’”*

“And they’d be right.”

“Without question.”

“However, I suppose there’s one more thing to be said about all this.”

“Oh? And what might that be? Don’t leave me hanging, Koutari. We’re pals, aren’t we? If you keep teasing me like this, I’m gonna lose weight from all the stress. Tell what else there is to say already.”

“Just that the incident involving Utsurigi Gaisuke, was a suicide.”

## 3

"Just that the incident involving Utsurigi Gaisuke, was a suicide. And I don't mean metaphorically."

When I heard those words pour from the transceiver, my body stiffened even further. I unconsciously huddled over the device, accidentally resulting in me awkwardly bumping into Kouta's nose. "Ow!" Kouta cried and pulled away.

"—You needn't get so close to hear, *dear friend.* That stung."

"Sorry…"

I gave an absentminded apology as I backed off the transceiver a little. Even then, I was still aware of how (pointlessly) close I was. I was aware, but I couldn't bring myself to back up any further.

"……"

"A suicide? What ever could you mean, Koutari?" Neo said in his characteristically theatric tone. "No matter how you look at it, he was killed by someone else. I'll admit, any locked room murder really ought to be considered a suicide, but that's most certainly not the case this time around. After all, the one responsible for *locking* the locked room was the auto-lock security system."

"When I say suicide, I mean suicide," came Koutari's low mutter. "After all, Neo, the Utsurigi Gaisuke we know wasn't the type to go out without a fight, was he?"

"Huh. I guess. I haven't actually met the man face-to-face myself, so I can't really say. Then again, based on the phone calls and mail I've read, not to mention all the rumors I've heard about his past, I suppose you could have a point. He didn't seem like one to lay down and take it."

He was exactly right. I hadn't even talked to Utsurigi for an hour, but that was enough to tell me all I needed about his strong sense of will— just like how the way Kunagisa talked about him was enough to tell me about his obstinance. For better or worse, he had the air of a prodigal genius who fundamentally viewed others as beneath him— self-righteousness wrapped in

pride. Would a man like that willingly let himself be killed? Not a chance. So long as it wasn't by *Dead Blue*, there wasn't a chance.

"But who's to say he really did just roll over and die?" came Neo's rebuttal. "After all, his corpse was violated beyond belief. How should I put it, it's like killing him wasn't satisfying enough. In other words, it's because of his personality, because he wasn't the kind of person who would let himself be killed, that he wound up like that. Isn't that how we should view this? Being scholars, and all."

"That's merely a matter of opinion. Let's take a look at it from the beginning," Koutari continued dispassionately. "Why was Utsurigi Gaisuke confined here to begin with?"

"The reason behind his confinement, huh? On the surface, that would be to serve as a research fellow, and behind the scenes he was the professor's personal *think-tank*, but if we peel back yet another layer, he was the professor's specimen, was he not?"

"That's not what I meant. I meant why he allowed himself to be confined."

"Ahh– I see what you're getting at."

Neo seemed to agree with where this was heading. I found myself nodding along as well.

That's right— the reason Gaisuke was here. That was another thing I was curious about. During yesterday's session, he had done a remarkable job dodging not just my questions, but Kunagisa's as well. Still, it appeared like **something** was up with him— like some kind of weakness was being used against him (although he had burst out laughing when I'd suggested as much), and that was the reason why he remained here.

"Let's see… I wonder what it was. I was never actually informed, so I don't know for certain, but it's something to do with his criminal past, no doubt— in other words, he threatened to expose some of his evil doings from his *Cluster* days or something, don't you think?"

"Wrong. That, too, is just the surface."

"Ahh. I see, a false rumour spread to conceal the truth, eh? I'm not sure if I should be calling him underhanded or just well-prepared, but at least the professor's consistent. So? Does that mean you know the truth then, Koutari?"

"I heard it from the man himself," Koutari said surprisingly. "I'm sure it was just a slip of the tongue, but— it had something to do with ***Kunagisa Tomo's birth***."

Those words were met with silence from Neo. I was silent too. How could I not be? Kunagisa's…birth? Did I hear him right?

I couldn't have.

"……What on earth– what do you mean?" Neo replied, straining to maintain his jovial tone. "I'm not sure I follow."

"I don't either," Koutari answered. "All I know was that it was a rather sore spot for Utsurigi. Until the end, it seems like that blue-haired girl took up no small part of his thoughts. After all, she was his *leader* from back in his *Cluster* days. If he refused to meet the professor's demands, or worse, run away, that secret would be exposed to the light of day— or something, I don't know. I know that he's *The Mad Daemon* and all, but I can't imagine there was any possible profit worth risking the ire of the Kunagisa Syndicate over. However—"

However, those kinds of threats–

"Those kinds of threats only hold power so long as they're not acted on. But *'what if'* is a hard thought to shake— and that's why Utsurigi Gaisuke was trapped here."

"Hmm, I see— but all this to say…*what* exactly, Koutari? Whether Utsurigi had a reason to be here, or whether the professor's reason for confining him was what we thought it was doesn't change the outcome, now does it? On the surface or behind the scenes, it doesn't matter. Utsurigi was forced to be here."

"Except, then, Kunagisa Tomo arrived," Koutari said. "That birthed a contradiction. He stayed here for the blue-haired girl's sake, but that could no longer be said to be true."

"So, you're saying— he killed himself?"

"It's only logical. By dying, the professor could no longer touch him. What point is there in blackmailing a corpse?"

Something about Koutari's opinion— struck a chord with me. At the very least, I got where he was coming from emotionally. This is the Utsurigi who had boldly claimed Kunagisa as his *Kaiser*. If the contents of the threat

levied against him pertained to Kunagisa— it wouldn't be strange for him to pick death. If so, then was yesterday's session meant to be some kind of final words. His last will and testament for his former leader, and for me, the man who would watch over her after his passing. If that's what this meant, then I can't say I'm not starting to understand what Kunagisa meant when she said he wanted to **restore his wicked name**.

Not restore his good name. Not clear his name, either.

But restore his wicked name.

To sully it further.

That said, if I were to add my two-cents, there still remained one more contradiction.

"Still, Koutari," as expected, that contradiction wasn't lost on Neo. "That's quite odd. Quite odd indeed. Utsurigi's murder— or suicide, as you so suggest, only put Lady Kunagisa in even more danger. I mean right now she's confined to a cage, a brand new semi-permanent fixture of this fine establishment."

"You're right," Koutari readily conceded as if this contradiction wasn't news to him. "Regardless—"

Just as Koutari was about to say something, his voice was overtaken by white noise. A sharp piercing screech caused me to unconsciously crank down the volume. Neither Koutari or Neo were still audible.

"—Is it broken?"

"No, it must have been a sudden phone call," Kouta said coolly. "You did notice the phone in the room, yes? There must have been some outside correspondence. Just because the phone is corded, doesn't mean there aren't any radio waves. 'Tis similar to how it becomes difficult to use a cellphone when working at the computer. The radio waves clashed, and it seems our feeble signal didn't stand a chance, or so I think."

"You think? These machines are awfully finicky." Let down by the sudden anti-climax, I stopped hovering over the transceiver and planted myself back down on the rooftop. "…Neo was doing his best to get Koutari to spill anything he could, but… it doesn't feel like we made any real progress."

"Is that so? That seemed like quite a telling conversation to me."

"Sure, I guess," I said, acquiescing. "On a conceptual level, I'm fine with the idea of Utsurigi's death being a suicide. I am, really, but now isn't the time for conceptualizing. I wouldn't mind chit-chatting about it when we've got a little more time… but in *reality*, Utsurigi was murdered. There's no question. A suicide like that isn't possible. Whether he went quietly or kicking and screaming is one thing, but he *was* murdered."

"Hmm… that may be." Kouta folded her arms. "By the by, what was all that about **Kunagisa Tomo's birth**? You wouldn't happen to know, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't."

An instant reply. A little too instant. Kouta looked as suspicious as could be. I didn't care. No matter how blatant the lie, once you've told it, you have to see it through. You have to.

"Fine then. 'Tis not as if digging into Miss Kunagisa's affairs would help me any…" after a moment or two glaring at each other, the one to break the silence was Kouta. "…More importantly, 'tis a long call, is it not? They should be wrapping it up soon. Then again, perhaps 'tis broken after all."

Kouta began fiddling with the transceiver. As I watched her out of the corner of my eye, I heaved another sigh. It seems like ever since I arrived here, discounting the time I spent sleeping, sighs like this had been an hourly occurrence. I hate letting my emotions run wild, but these waves were especially harsh. Three more days here would likely drive me mad. Or maybe it already had. As I thought about all I'd done to get this far, I couldn't help feeling that way.

I looked at my watch. There was precisely one hour left.

"Ah. We're back,"

Kouta said, placing the transceiver back down on the roof. I abandoned my relaxed position and leaned forward, once again hovering over the device.

" ……　　……—— what did he say?"

"Well, you see," Neo said with an odd sort of clarity. "Listen carefully, Koutari. This is an extremely delicate matter."

"? What is?"

“The professor’s call just now— it appears there’s been an incident. And not just any run-of-the mill incident either, it’s a big one— the incident to end all incidents.”

Neo’s old-fashioned tone was, once again, strangely articulate. That’s right. It’s almost as if. As if the voice that trailed from the transceiver on the ground was doing its best to reach Kouta and I at all costs. As if there was something it needed to tell us.

Suddenly, he cleared his throat.

Kouta also huddled closer to make out what he was about to say.

“The lad that came here with Lady Kunagisa— he’s disappeared.”

I hesitated for just a moment. But the very next-

I was up. And running. Without thinking. I cleared the two-metre gap between the Fifth and Fourth Wards, and touched down on the roof. From there, I ran towards the rooftop entrance. I could hear a voice call out behind me. It was Kouta’s voice. She was saying something. I couldn’t make it out. I didn’t have the time. I gripped the knob to throw the door open, but it was locked and didn’t budge. Like that would stop me. I summoned all my strength and repeatedly kicked the area around the doorknob. The door itself was sturdy, but if met with a concentrated and continuous force at the fulcrum, the point of stress, a lock like this was easily broken. Who was it that told me that? I can’t recall. Someone from when I lived abroad. It left signs of forced entry, but I was past the point of caring about leaving evidence. Everything was already out in the open.

A number of kicks later, the door was open. I had broken it down.

“—damn!”

The hour that remained. It had blown away like paper in the wind. How did they notice I was gone? How? Had Kasugai gone downstairs on a whim to check on things? Had Shito and Misachi woken up sooner than expected? No, come to think of it, even before that, Misachi had a chance to fire off that shot. Had the sound reached someone? Miss Kokoromi couldn’t have ratted me out to the professor, could she? Or perhaps the phone call I made to Hime just now left some kind of record and someone had found it suspicious? Any of which seemed possible, but none of them left me satisfied.

Then again, nothing in this life is perfectly satisfying. This was reality. Goddamnit, what use are words and reason? In the end they lead to nothing but misunderstandings and false assumptions.

Since I'd already been found out, there was no reason not to use the elevator. However, since the elevator shaft didn't reach the roof, using the stairs was unavoidable. I'd climb down to the fourth floor and take the elevator from there. Having made up my mind, I headed to the top of the stairs and was about to take the first step when-

–something gripped my shoulder from behind.

It was Kouta.

"—Where do you think you're going?"

Kouta's voice was the slightest bit haggard. Given my head start, it seemed like catching up to me was no simple task, even for Kouta. Ahh, that's right. Kicking down the door had cost me some time. Damnit. I don't have time to deal with you right now.

"—Even if you return to the cage, nothing will come of it."

Nothing? Is that right? I suppose it was. She was spot on. Kouta was telling the truth. Even if I went back, there was nothing I could do. Make no mistake. But that's precisely **why** I needed to go back. I tried to shake off her hand, but Kouta's fingers dug into me; her grip was unshakeable.

"…I'm grateful to you, Ishimaru Kouta," I said perfunctorily. "I really am. It's because of you that I was able to hold on to hope for these past few hours. You let me keep dreaming that there was still some way out. Thank you."

"What are you blabbering about? You make it sound like you're about to die." Kouta forcefully turned me to face her. "All hope is not lost quite yet. In fact, now that you've been found out, you are the only hope remaining, don't you see? For Kunagisa, for Suzunashi, and for yourself. And you aim to throw that hope away?"

"I'm not throwing it away. I'm giving it back," I answered robotically. "From here on out, this has nothing to do with you. So, you should just—"

A dry sound rang out. It took me three seconds to realize Kouta had slapped me. It didn't hurt. It seems all the excitement had dulled my nerves.

Still, it burned.

"It *'has nothing to do with me'*? We have been a team for hours, and now, all of sudden, you say it has nothing to do with me? You—" Kouta seemed somewhat agitated, but she managed to forcefully keep her voice down. "…You are completely off the rails."

"I get that a lot," I nodded, meekly. "More than you can imagine."

"Do you recall? What I said to you on the roof of the Seventh Ward? *'Should you run off on your own again, I shall have no choice but to rethink our alliance'*."

"Please do, it doesn't matter." I bowed my head. "Thank you for all you've done for m-"

I never got to finish before Kouta shoved me. I tumbled backwards, with no time to take a defensive posture, I landed in a heap on the landing, having bashed myself across all thirteen stairs. My momentum was halted when I crashed into the opposing wall. "That hurts," I eked out. That said, it didn't hurt at all. If anything, it felt like a weight off my shoulders. This was the first time I'd felt so relieved since stepping foot in this facility.

Then, something clattered down from above, coming to rest at my feet. It was the lockpicking knife, the *anti-lock blade*. The instant I laid eyes on it I glanced once again to the top of the stairs. There, in the same pose she took when she tossed the knife, stood Kouta.

"A parting gift, *dear friend*." in a dispassionate, utterly disinterested tone, Kouta said her final remarks. "Try not to kick down any more doors. You shall hurt yourself. Moreover, 'twill also make a decent weapon if it ever comes down to it. Surely you aren't content with just that knife in your right-breast pocket, now are you? And a word of advice, don't use the gun. Although perhaps this is naught but unwelcome meddling."

"____"

I opened my mouth to speak, but as I watched Kouta turn back and walk away, I couldn't say anything. When Kouta's figure had finally faded from view, I picked up the knife and brought myself to my feet. Nothing seemed broken or swollen. You even shove people with finesse, Ishimaru Kouta, I thought, as I gazed at the knife. I thought, as I recalled the woman who called me her friend until the very end. When all was said and done, I had simply used her, unable to give anything back. I regretted it. That said, perhaps that wasn't solely unique to her. They say human relationships are

give and take, but I have always leant on others, I have always been a burden. If even one of the people I'd met hadn't been there for me, I likely wouldn't even be alive.

And so,

"There comes a time to put an end to everything, even nonsense…"

So. Let's give back. Give it all back.

Just a bit, all of it. Half of it, in its entirety.

Like when I first met that blue boy.

Like before we met.

I hated deciding. I hated choosing. I was unable to take interest in others. I was unable take interest in myself. I hated conflict. I hated competition. I hated being laughed at. Me, who could not laugh. Me, who could not cry. I could feel neither joy nor anger. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't feel anything. I couldn't grasp anything. And since I couldn't have it, I broke it. I wanted it, so I destroyed it. I desired it, so I threw it away. I wanted to trust them, so I betrayed them. I liked them, so I rejected them. I wanted to protect them, so I hurt them. I felt comfortable, so I escaped. We were friends, so I was alone. I was jealous, so I crushed them. Necessary things became unnecessary. Love became hate. I pretended to be cold. I pretended to be detached. I pretended to be enlightened. I pretended to be a wise. I pretended to be a fool. I pretended to be human. I tried to be someone else. I was unable to be anyone but myself. I admired others. I hated myself. I tried to like myself. I tried to like others. I tried to love others. I could not love anyone other than myself. I could not love myself. I didn't understand how to love or be loved, equally. So, I ran. But there was no escape. From anywhere. From anyone.

Life was cruel.

"…Now then, let's have a masterpiece."

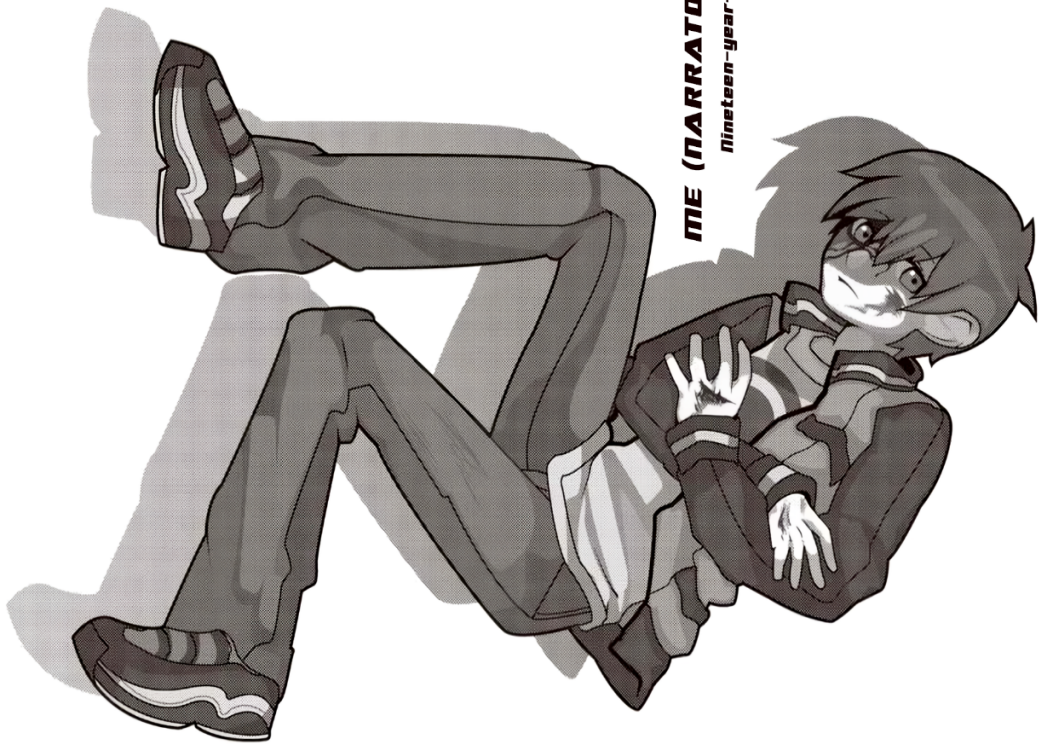
I'll kill them, slice them to bits, line them all up, trim them down to size – and set them out for all the world to see.

I felt dreadfully quiet.

I confirmed the knife in my breast pocket was still there, and then, with the lockpicking knife still gripped in my left hand, I began to descend the

stairs.

I began to fall.


ME (NARRATOR)
Nineteen-year-old

## 0

*Your value is determined by others.*
*Others' value is also determined by others.*

## 1

In the end I took the stairs all the way down. I had no trouble getting to the fourth-floor hallway, but when I arrived, the elevator was still stopped at the basement. Even in my excited state, I would have found it obvious that running down the steps would get me there faster. But by that point I wasn't excited at all. My head was so cool my body temperature may have been below zero.

Halfway down I stumbled, tumbling two– three times before slamming into the staircase landing. Still, I was up again in no time. It's not that I got off without a scratch, it's just that it didn't hurt. By now, it had spread all throughout me. While it's impossible for living things to control their own nervous system, something very similar was happening to me. Speaking of which, I heard when living things receive a fatal injury— like having half their head crushed, or getting cut clean in half— their nervous system shuts down completely. When your body realizes that, no matter how desperately it struggles, it won't last longer than a few minutes, the natural signals that denote danger become pointless– unnecessary. I found the thought comforting. As unseemly a story it was, I found it extraordinarily comforting. When one doesn't fear death, pain loses its purpose. Who knew living things could become this strong with just that one conviction. Or perhaps by abandoning that conviction, they could become this weak. Whichever it was, I thought it was wonderful. As I propped myself up on the wall after falling for the fourth time, I truly thought so.

The fact that it didn't so much as itch let alone hurt when I fell was something to be grateful for– although, in truth, there was a sensation somewhat resembling itching– but the fact I could no longer walk straight was becoming a problem. My feet never seemed to reach the floor. Each step was extraordinarily uneasy. It was like swimming around in zero-gravity. On the topic, once upon a time— when I was still thirteen-years-old, back before I'd participated in the ER Program, Kunagisa and I talked about something

similar. By the time we're adults, do you think anyone could take a trip to space? It's possible. Would you wanna go? Nah, I don't really care. What about you, Kunagisa? I'd go! Hmph, a shut-in who wants to go to space? How elitist can you get? What's an '*aleetist*'? Something completely worthless. I'm not worthless. Perhaps, but space is worthless. After all, nothing on Earth's worth anything either. There's nothing of value anywhere at all. Nowhere? Nowhere. If you went to space and gazed at the Earth, the only thing you'd take away is that it's *'blue'*. Is that really worth going to space for? If that's all you're after, you're better off picking up some colour swatches. At least then it wouldn't just be blue, you'd also have red, black, green and all the rest. Space exploration is nothing more than a way to prove your own insignificance. The result of unbridled romanticism and nothing else. If I wanted that, I'd be better off just looking at your hair. E-he-he. Don't just laugh for no reason. It's creepy. That's exactly what I hate about you. And that's exactly what I love about'cha! Oh, shut up.

"—stop trying to suck up to me…"

Honestly, what a worthless kid. I thought to myself. How conceited, how conceited, how conceited. How smug, how smug, how smug. I mistook that for self-awareness. I only looked at the world from the front, or perhaps the back— either way, my view was one-sided. And with that narrow view of things, I felt enlightened; I spoke as if I knew it all. Beyond terrified that my false veneer would crack. And when it inevitably did, it left me empty. The fabrication had become my reality. A tragedy that evoked neither tears nor laughter– a farce. What's more, that farce wasn't over. Continuing forever. Halted forever. In short, having gotten tangled up in *Dead Blue*, I haven't grown at all. I don't have any plans to either. Not when there were other things that needed doing.

The fifth tumble. This one landed me on the basement floor. I must have hit my head pretty badly this time. The pain was as vague and distant as ever, but I now experienced brief lapses in consciousness. They brought with them more memories of my past. First, my family. My younger sister. My older sister. My Father. My Mother. My grandparents. Memories of my childhood. But not once did I see the face of a friend. I knew no one. No one knew me. The accident. The collapse. The airplane. My little sister stopped appearing around then. Goodbye. Kasumioka. Nao. And Kunagisa Tomo. Everything else faded away. I wonder if this also counted as my life flashing before my eyes. Words lost their meaning. The ER3 System. My meeting with Miss Kokoromi. The classmates I never got to know. The rare few I had. Omokage Magokoro. My parting with my teacher. After that, all sorts of things happened. Most of which I didn't remember. If I had, my head likely would have burst. Dropping-out. Japan. Kyoto. Reuniting with Kunagisa

Tomo. Kunagisa Tomo, exactly the same as I had left her. And me, exactly the same as when I left. Asano Miiko. Suzunashi Neon. The Christian old man and the runaway siblings. I wonder what happened to the woman after she left for Tokyo. Wet Crow's Feather Island. The painter without a style. The headless seventh fool. The nervous chef. The detestable fortune-teller. Him, the accomplice. The exiled lady and her triplet maids. How I wish I could see them again. Aikawa Jun. Humanity's Strongest Contractor. May. Getting to know her and her friends. And my first contact with the Human Failure. Our self-indulgent conversations. Our self-loathing conversations. The wicked witch, Nananami Nanami. It wasn't until the entrance of the young girl who called me master— Hime— that I managed to get a hold of myself again. Well look at that, I muttered to myself. I muttered consciously. I remembered an awful lot, didn't I? Oh man, looks like my memory's not completely worthless after all. Oh man, indeed. I picked myself up off the floor. Retrieving the lockpicking-knife that had clattered onto the ground, I thrust it into the keyhole on the door. I jimmied it around a couple of times, and just like that, it effortlessly came undone. I gripped the knob. I still felt no sensation. Judging by the way my body was moving, nothing seemed to be broken. That was nothing but hasty speculation, but I chose to believe it anyway as I pushed open the door.

The Fourth Ward's basement corridor was dimly lit, with the only light source being fluorescent bulbs that hung from the ceiling looking like they might sputter out at any moment. I stepped inside. No sooner had I done so than I heard a voice. Relief. It seems my hearing wasn't as muted as my sense of touch. After such a nasty fall down the stairs, it wouldn't have been surprising if I had ruptured an eardrum, but it seems I needn't have worried. I pricked my ears.

"—I . ——and so—"

This voice— who was it? It was horribly monotonous, leaving no space between each word— its cadence resembled synthesized speech. That's when it hit me. Of course. It was Kasugai. Kasugai Kasuga. But where was she? Just ahead. At the cage just ahead of course.

"—If that boy were to run off somewhere then that would be my responsibility. If that were to happen I would be in quite the predicament. As such I have no choice but to question you. Understand?"

Kasugai's voice. I wouldn't call it calm per se— but it was far from agitated. Stepping quietly and stifling my breathing, I carefully crept down the hall one step at a time. Suddenly, I was hit with an awful headache. Perhaps one of those tumbles had done some damage to my brain. Not that it mattered. My brain was broken to begin with, so I didn't much care what happened to it.

I didn't care so long as it could hold out just a little longer. Just a little longer. I just needed a little more time. There's still something I had to do.

That was when I almost burst out laughing. I hadn't laughed in so long. Something I had to do? Me? To think, me, of all people, winding up with something like that. Even a child who'd abandoned all sense of duty and privilege could wind up with something like that. If that were true, then perhaps I hadn't been halted after all. Or perhaps it was always there, and I just pretended not to notice until now. Probably the latter. In other words, more than I had ever realized, more so than anyone had ever realized, I was a hopeless idiot.

But in the end, I did not laugh.

"Who's to say, really?"

A nostalgic voice. Even though it had only been a couple hours since I'd heard it last, Suzunashi's voice was music to my ears.

"Maybe he just went home? He couldn't have been happy with his treatment. Inoji grew up quite spoiled it seems, so maybe he couldn't bear another second in this dismal place."

"—Take this seriously please." Kouta's voice was as unexpressive as ever. It conveyed neither anger, blame, nor confusion. "How do you suppose he got out exactly? If you're saying that's what happened then surely you must have seen how he did it. How did that boy escape? Was it with the help of an insider perhaps?"

Odd. In addition to Kasugai's voice, I also heard something resembling a low guttural sound. Like a wild animal. It surely couldn't have been Kasugai. Not Suzunashi either. Then who? It couldn't be Kunagisa, could it? Suddenly tingles ran through my legs as if they had fallen asleep. No, not my legs. My whole body. The pain I had sealed away seemed to be returning.

"Now that you mention it—"

Then-

"—I saw it! Iichan dislocated all his joints and slipped right through the bars! Classic Iichan, you never know what he's gonna do next!"

The tingling ceased. A wave of relief washed over me. It seemed Kunagisa was still safe. However, overlapping Kunagisa's words, the

rumbling continued. What on earth was it? Was there someone else here as well? No, it didn't feel that way. While my internal senses had been dulled, my external senses were amplified not two- but, two-hundred-fold. In that case. I had to do something while Kasugai was still alone.

I tried collecting my thoughts. Was there really no way to solve this? I'd only been thinking for two seconds when I shook my head in frustration. I'd been thinking for the past three hours and hadn't come up with anything even resembling a solution. What good would come from thinking about it now? I didn't need to think. After all, my brain was nothing more than a defective product. Like an expert relying on muscle memory, without a single thought, I just had to hope my body would move on its own. I just had to pray.

I made to round the corner so I could head in the direction of the voices. Right, once I round this corner, then the cage where Kunagisa and Suzunashi are should—

"—…"

Then- There was Kasugai. In her white lab coat. She turned her cold gaze in my direction. At her feet was a dog. One of the dogs that toyed with me last night. Ahh, so this was the source of the growling. The dog- massive, black, and vicious-looking. Just like last night, it wasn't on a leash, it wasn't even wearing a collar. Why did she bring the dog with her all the way to the basement? I didn't understand what Kasugai was thinking. Naturally, I returned her gaze. Kasugai appeared a little taken aback, but she didn't let it show on her face. "—Oh my," she said calmly.

"Why are you—"

"Ah, it's Iichan!" Kunagisa's excitement was incredibly out-of-place as she clung to the bars. "Yoohoo, Iichan! Welcome back!"

I didn't respond. I just stood there, staring down Kasugai. That said, I couldn't bring myself to ignore her completely either, and my gaze flitted over to the cage where Kunagisa was kept. She looked in good spirits. At a glance, she didn't appear to be hurt or anything either. It seems like I had made it in time. At least, I think I did. Suzunashi was there too. She appeared calm and composed as she leaned against the wall. Except, at the sight of me, she let out a sigh of exasperation and said in a soft, somber voice, "…so, Inoji?"

"…from the looks of it, it doesn't look good."

"Ah! You're right! Iichan's all banged up. He's all covered in scrapes. He's even bleeding. You think he's okay?"

Suzunashi's comment was clearly about my progress on the case. However, Kunagisa didn't seem to care about that at all; she was more worried about my body. Typical. Kunagisa never considered herself. Why? I didn't understand.

I took out the lock-picking knife and took a couple unsteady steps towards the cage (…I had intended it to be a steady stride…). Huh? The cage was unlocked. Why? Kasugai must have opened it herself. I turned to face her.

"Hold on— I'd prefer it if you didn't do anything hasty. Stay where you are."

She was saying something. I couldn't hear her. I must've ruptured an eardrum after all. I heard her, but I didn't understand. I understood her, but the meaning was lost on me. It was like listening to beginner French for dummies. Well, whatever. Even if I could hear her, it wouldn't have mattered. I opened the cell door.

"Let's go home, Tomo."

"Huh? Uh, sure—"

Kunagisa looked confused. That's strange. Isn't it? Did I say something weird? We're just going home together. Like always. We go somewhere, then we come back. That's all. That reminds me, I needed to pick up some uirō-mochi on the way home. For Hime's friends. Miiko will probably want some too, so I'll grab six or seven.

Something gripped my shoulder. It was Kasugai.

"—Why don't you step inside for me. I promise not to be any harsher on you than I have to."

"Shut up. I'll kill you."

I turned around and ripped her hand off me.

"Don't get in our way. We're leaving."

"I can't allow that."

Showing no signs of intimidation, Kasugai pushed me away. Her shove caused me to stumble two or three steps away from the cage. Away from Kunagisa. Ahh, I had to get back to her. But my path was blocked. By

Kasugai and her dog.

That's when I finally realized. The black dog at Kasugai's feet was not one I met last night. They looked nearly identical, but their aura couldn't have been more different. It wasn't just vicious-looking. It truly was vicious. Its two eyes glared at me as if I were its prey. Its front legs poised like it was about to pounce. Its weight settled onto its back legs, carefully preparing to attack. Compared to **this**, the two dogs last night may as well have been children's pets. They may have worn the same skin, but this was an entirely different animal.

"The final triplet—huh?"

"Precisely."

Kasugai lowered her gaze slightly to rest on the dog.

"What's more **this one** is far less docile and obedient than the two you saw last night. Remember my experiment? This is what you call a result."

The result of her experiment? What kind of experiment could she have done to make this dog so different from its kin. I felt like she mentioned something about it yesterday. Or maybe she hadn't. I couldn't remember. I didn't need to remember. The only thing that mattered was what Kasugai intended to use this dog for. What she intended to let it do to Kunagisa.

"—What were you thinking?" I asked. "Bringing such a mad dog with you— this isn't funny anymore."

"I had no choice since you escaped. All you had to do was wait quietly," Kasugai answered coolly. Without hesitation or doubt. "So be a dear and get inside the cage won't you? If I had the choice I wouldn't be doing this either. But I don't. That's all there is to it."

Ordinary.

Kasugai's tone was all too ordinary.

Despite this extraordinary place.

Despite the extraordinary circumstances.

She was still this ordinary.

"—I get it now. That's how it is… **That**'s how it is, you're like **that**

too."

I understood.

…At long last I'd come to understand what Neo had meant when he told me to be *'wary of Kasugai.'*

It all makes sense… that's what he meant. This is what it meant to have no conviction. Ultimately, it meant you were capable of anything. You had no limitations. No creed. And thus, no obligation. That's what Kasugai Kasuga was made of. Be it logic or debate– ethics or consensus– it all meant nothing to her.

By choosing nothing for herself, deciding nothing for herself, this was the outcome. She could bind others, imprison them, harm them, all without a care. And not even out of some strong sense of belief– for she had none to begin with.

Professor Kyouichirou had done what he did for the sake of his research. Miss Kokoromi had helped him out in service of her goals, and in service of her goals, she abandoned him. Shito and Misachi had assisted him because of their loyalty, and it was because of that loyalty that they crumbled so easily.

Kasugai was different.

She had no reason. She had no motive. She never followed any logic to begin with. And in the end, she was never meant to be understood. If I had to put it into words, it would be 'psycho logical'- nothing more. Beyond saving. Beyond redemption. If I had arrived a moment later and Kasugai had set that dog loose inside the cell, she would likely be just as unmoved as she was now. Even if it had resulted in Kunagisa's death, she would be just as calm. Without an end, there can be no means, and without guilt, there can be no remorse. There was no room for diplomacy. She could be neither persuaded, enticed, nor coerced.

A lack of conviction.

It was just as frightening as Neo insisted.

But in that case—

"In that case, you're just like me—"

I reached into my breast pocket and retrieved the weapon. My left

hand still gripped the lock-picking knife, and the thin blade I got from Aikawa was in my right. Each of them pointed directly at Kasugai. Not only did Kasugai not look particularly surprised, she didn't look affected in the slightest.

"I wouldn't put up any meaningless resistance if I were you."

"Meaningless?"

"Utterly. The professor and the other researchers should be on their way any minute now. Even if you cut through me what do you think will happen next? It's pointless."

"I wouldn't say that," I took a step closer. The distance between us wasn't even two metres. There was no point using the gun this close. Even without Kouta's warning, I wasn't foolish enough to try something like that given my lack of training. No, what I had in mind was far more foolish. "After I cut through you, I'll cut my way through the professor and anyone else who comes running. That's what I planned to do in the first place."

"You're mad."

I don't want to hear that from you.

But before I could tell her as much, Kasugai clicked her fingers. When she did, the black dog moved swiftly. Snapping her fingers must've been some kind of signal. I should've expected as much from Kasugai, a zoologist. Although, it wasn't completely unexpected— which meant her surprise attack had failed; I didn't panic too much as I hopped onto my backfoot, retreating three or so feet. As if making clear its intent to protect her, the black dog stopped directly in front of Kasugai.

"As your senior let me give you some advice. Once it sinks its fangs into you you're finished. If we stop now I can still keep a tight leash on it— metaphorically at least. Regardless it's still under my control."

I ignored Kasugai and focused my attention on the black dog. Kunagisa and Suzunashi said nothing. They weren't within my field of view, so I couldn't see the expressions on their faces either. Although, perhaps they were saying something and I just couldn't hear it.

Oh man— I might've lost my mind.

To not even be able to hear Kunagisa's voice–

"Honestly, how pleasant… honestly honestly honestly honestly honestly honestly honestly honestly honestly honestly honestly honestly."

I tossed the lock-picking knife to the ground. *Clatter*, a dry sound echoed down the hallway. The dog reacted slightly, but it didn't lunge. There was no chance I'd be able to fight a dog like this with both hands occupied. One blade was more than enough.

"I see— that's how it is. I can tell you're serious about this. I've got to say I'm somewhat disappointed." Even if it was only a little bit, Kasugai truly did sound let down. "I always thought the two of us might be able to get along."

"I've just felt that way for the first time, Kasugai Kasuga."

"*—break it.*"

That was the signal. As if releasing all of its pent-up momentum, the black dog exploded into action- its massive jaws opened wide as it lunged for me. I see. Its intent was never to protect Kasugai. It was to tear me apart. That was one hell of a miscalculation. I had been unwittingly chatting with Kasugai, completely unaware that I was already dead. I was already dead, but my body moved anyway. Long before a single thought entered my head, my body moved swiftly.

What my body chose to do struck even me as odd. I thrust my left arm into the open jaws of the lunging dog. To be more precise, with all my weight behind it, I thrust my forearm in between the crowded rows of sharp fangs aimed directly at my throat, almost as if I was attempting to take its jaw clean off. After all, a dog's legs served little purpose besides being a means of locomotion. When hunting prey, their sole weapon was their fangs— as Kasugai herself hinted at, it was the fangs to watch out for. With that in mind, it was easy to predict its trajectory, and once I'd done so, blocking was even easier. Unfortunately, as a simple fact of base animal instinct, once dogs bite on, removing them becomes no simple task. Especially once the fangs have sunk in.

That's how I'd explain it logically at least, but I wasn't thinking about such things. Simply put, when your opponent opens their mouth, you elbow them in the face.

Nonetheless, despite stealing the initiative, I was still knocked down. Even with all of my body weight focused into my elbow strike, holding my ground against such a massive dog was impossible. I was reminded of the

fundamental difference in strength between man and beast. I landed hard on my back with the black dog pinning me down. It was a similar scene to last night. Only that time there were two of them, still, I found it much more preferable to now. Having succeeded in bringing me to the ground, the black dog planted its front paws on my chest. Then it sunk its fangs deeper into my left arm.

The black dog continued to bite down harder. It seemed to have no intention of letting go after all. Of course it didn't, it had bitten through my jacket. What's more, the fabric had bunched up. Removing its fangs wouldn't be easy. Not like that was all too convenient for me. If it couldn't let go, it would be easier to bite my arm clean off. Still, the arm is fairly muscular, even for someone like me, so despite being such a large dog, it wasn't about to bite all the way through. That said, it was more than capable of crushing my bones. It was certainly strong enough for that. The strength of the legs that pinned me down made that abundantly clear. The pain made my nerves go haywire; I could do nothing to resist. I couldn't even think. All I could do was scream, completely at the mercy of my opponent— or at least that's how it would have gone if things were **normal**.

However- I couldn't feel any pain right now.

Neither the fangs that tore into me, nor the paws that held me down, I felt nothing. I felt nothing. I felt nothing at all. Only a slight sense of disappointment that my left arm, which had only just healed, wouldn't be usable for a little while longer. I swung my right arm. My right arm which was clutching the knife. I showed no mercy. The black dog must've seen it coming, but there was nothing it could do. It's your fault for digging your fangs in so deep. And you have to take responsibility for your own actions, no matter what. Right?

Man,

We were both in such terrible positions.

The dog's pitch-black eyes opened wide as I thrust the knife as hard as I could into its left eye-socket. I felt next to no resistance as the blade carved through bone and plunged into its brain. The dog didn't yelp, instead, possessing a strength I never thought it capable of, it bit down into my arm even harder. I got the feeling that my muscles had long since been destroyed, and the fangs were now burrowing directly into my bones. If it continued like this, the dog biting clean through my arm might not have been so outlandish after all. Even if you destroy its brain, living things don't die immediately. Damnit, how much longer? How much longer until this thing dies? How much longer until my body gives out? How much longer until my mind gives

out? Shit. I mustn't have destroyed it enough. Not nearly enough. Destroy. RipTear. Hack. Mangle. I need to maim. To butcher. RendBreakMutilate. More destruction. How fleeting. How fleeting this life is. How short-lived, this dream. This reality. With all the strength I could muster, I managed to lift my upper body.

"—GAAAAAAAH!"

I re-gripped the knife and drew a line from skull to torso. With my other arm, I wrenched backwards. Essentially, by dragging the knife forwards with my right arm, and using all my might to drag the dog's body backwards — by its fangs— with my left, I managed to exert twice as much force on the knife as I would have with a single arm. The sound of bone being cut, the sound of blood vessels bursting, the sound of skin tearing. They rang out. My eardrums must have started working again, for as awful as those sounds were, they rang out almost pleasantly.

Once I'd dragged the blade halfway across its black body, I removed the knife with no small amount of effort. No sooner had I done so than it began to gush blood. All over my head. All over my body. The black dog's insides poured out. Its black insides. Its insides- like darkness was flowing forth.

They sparkled.

"—Ha…h—"

With a thud,

My body collapsed. I hadn't meant to, but collapse, I did. Like my batteries had run dry. Like I needed to recharge. Except… I could no longer move. Laying on top of me, with its insides spilt everywhere, was the black dog. How heavy. How unbearably heavy. My eyelids were heavy. I'm tired. I want to sleep. I want to rest. Not yet. Not just yet. This wasn't the end of anything.

*Clap clap clap,*

The sound of applause.

"—Marvelous. Well done boy. I'm the tiniest bit impressed." It was Kasugai. "You could even say I'm moved. Besting such a large beast is certainly amazing in its own right— but I'm far more amazed by how you managed to kill an animal without batting an eye. —That's no easy feat you know. Not unless you're one of those fools who can't see the value of life

don't you agree? To know what it means to take a life and take it anyways is a remarkable thing. You're not so much an oblivious fool and more so a wilful fool."

"I'm honoured by your praise," I said, gasping for breath. I wonder if I managed to get the words out properly. I'm not sure. "—Now, stand aside and let us pass. You don't want to die as well, do you?"

"You're right. I suppose I don't want to die. Especially after finally meeting someone like you. However even someone like me can't act unbothered after having their dog killed…and besides,"

Kasugai cupped her ear like she was listening for something. The reason why became apparent a moment later. *Ding*. That sound played to indicate that the elevator had just arrived on our floor. The elevator. The elevator that was already here when I checked on the fourth floor. The elevator that should have already been in the basement had just arrived. In other words, it had just completed its return trip. That meant someone was on it.

Someone was coming.

"Time's up— you see."

If only a little, Kasugai's words conveyed a sense of pity. Although, maybe I just misunderstood her. I shakily raised my head, turning my gaze towards the cage. There she was, Kunagisa Tomo. But I didn't see Suzunashi. She must have gone somewhere. Or had she? All I could see was Kunagisa.

For me, Kunagisa Tomo was all there was.

Huh? Why? Why are you making such a miserable face? You shouldn't be able to make a face like that, should you? You're always smiling. Smiling innocently. No matter the circumstances, you always show me that smiling face. No matter the situation, you're always grinning. Like you're having fun. It's no good if you're not smiling. So why? I don't understand, Kunagisa. I- That face-

I've only seen it-

Once before.

…Only once.

I heard the footsteps of someone coming this way. I craned my head a

little to look in their direction. They weren't alone. There were many. Leading the way was Professor Shadou Kyouichirou. Right behind him was Neo Furuara. Then Koutari Hinayoshi. Wait? Isn't that Ougaki Shito too? And next to him, Uze Misachi. Would you look at that- I guess they were already awake. In that case, Kasugai likely came to check on the cage after getting a call from them after all. It probably wasn't smart to leave Shito right next to the entrance. I didn't know for sure though. Trailing behind the two of them was Miss Miyoshi Kokoromi. Ahh. Since Kasugai was already here, that meant everyone at the facility was gathered here.

It's probably too late,

I thought.

It *is* too late,

I realized.

"In the end—"

Kasugai said.

"—what on earth did you hope to gain?"

She asked.

A question so intensely certain, so horrifically piercing that Kasugai was likely the only one in this wide, yet small world that could ask it so matter-of-factly.

"—Love,"

I muttered.

It wasn't an answer, just a murmur.

"I wanted love—"

What a pleasant feeling. I wanted to laugh. Really, I did.

I used my free hand to prop myself up, then I went to stand. This is fine. Let's continue this pointless resistance to the end. Being a sore loser is one of my selling points. My entire body, slick with gore. My spirit, stained with blood. My clothes felt disgusting. So did my thoughts. Still, this felt like the only course of action left to me. I glanced at the knife. As expected of something belonging to Humanity's Strongest Contractor, despite causing so

much destruction, the blade wasn't so much as nicked. It might be easier than I thought-

To tear open my own throat.

I looked at Kunagisa.

She looked like she was about to cry. Clutching the bars, she looked like she was on the verge of tears. Except, no tears came. She wore a sorrowful expression as if she were trying to laugh and cry at the same time. That's right. Just as I couldn't laugh, she couldn't cry. Just like me, she couldn't cry. She didn't know how to be sad. That's what resulted in such an ugly expression. What a damn shame. I had hoped the last thing I saw would be Kunagisa's innocent, pure smile.

Ahh, then again,

That would be,

Asking for the moon, wouldn't it?

I noticed my left arm felt heavy.

The black dog- The black dog whose lifeblood had already seeped out- still had its jaws clamped tight around my arm. It reminded me of Utsurigi. It reminded me of his corpse. The scissors that were plunged through his eyes, destroying his brain, his throat and chest, his mutilated stomach, his skewered legs, and his severed arms. It seemed, unconsciously, I had taken a page from the culprit's playbook. What an awful joke. Perhaps I really was the culprit after all.

Not like it mattered anymore. What actually happened was no longer the issue. All that mattered was what was perceived to have happened. That's all. The footsteps drew closer. As they did, my vision grew hazy, so I couldn't tell how far away they were. One thing's for sure: my time was well-and-truly up. I brought my right hand, still holding the knife, to the dog's mouth. It was somewhat difficult to move like this. And besides, it felt cruel to leave this thing hanging on. How pitiful, let's cut you loose. Odd, it must've been snagged or something, because I couldn't pry it off. No this wasn't about it being snagged or stuck or anything. It was rock solid. That's right, a so-called cadaveric spasm. The phenomenon where, after meeting a violent end, the body stiffens. I'd talked about it with Miss Kokoromi only a couple hours ago, but I never thought I'd get to see it with my own two eyes.

"—huh—?"

Just as I was about to use the blade to start carving away at the dog's mouth, I stiffened as well. I completely froze.

A— **Cadaveric Spasm**? Did I say that?

"—You bastard! What are you doing!?"

Shito's voice echoed through the basement. However, his words meant nothing to me. Frozen as I was, nothing meant anything at all. My eardrums didn't so much as oscillate. Wait a second. Think. Think! Calm down. No, don't. Get fired up. I'm right there. All I need to do is grasp it. Just grasp it. A little more. Reach. Reach a little further.

Are you telling me… **that's how it was**?

I didn't even notice that I'd let go of the knife as it clattered to the ground.

Utsurigi Gaisuke. Suppose- suppose he's the kind of man I thought he was. Given yesterday's conversation and all. *Malignant Green*. *The Bacteria. Cluster. Cracker*. The fact that a man who would never surrender himself to death was murdered. For Kunagisa's sake. For Kunagisa's sake that man did anything Professor Kyouichirou asked of him. The former comrade of Kunagisa Tomo.

His crucifixion.

Suppose that was just the impetus.

Not an illusion, but an impetus.

"Hey, asshole! Are you even listening!?"

*Thump*, somebody shoved me. It was probably Shito. I had only made it halfway up before my body became intimately familiar with the ground again. It hurt. My sense of pain was returning. My nerves, springing back to life. My body hurt all over. Especially my arm. Naturally. It felt like half my flesh had been gouged out. But I couldn't complain. Not when I had taken my opponent's life.

Only now did I consider how wrong I was.

But it wasn't wrong, was it?

You weren't wrong.

Even though you're not wrong, you still died.

Even though you’re not wrong.

Even though you’re not wrong.

“Oi, Kasugai— what the hell—” “Ahh— I told him but—” “Kiddo, what in tarnation– — hey, kiddo—” “ hang on——” “—— Explain yourself, bastard– –” “…dog…” “ — ” “ blood—fangs ” “ first aid ” “

I spoke quietly,

“For the first time since I was born, I actually feel like praising myself. Sure, I know it’s delusion talking- I know that- but I couldn’t care less anymore. So please, even if only a little, let me bask in this feeling just a little while longer–”

But even that was out of reach. They couldn’t even allow me that much. I slowly began to lose consciousness. This time, out of relief. Only, I thought I might never wake up.

I might never wake up…?

Well, I guess that’s fine too.

I’m just- so happy right now.

“……”

The last thing my fading sight glimpsed was Kunagisa Tomo. Everything was hazy, so I couldn’t make anything out, but my vision was blue.

Pure,

Clear,

Beautiful,

And comfortable.

How — blue.

“……”

Can I say something selfish?

I love you.

## 2

Let me recount an old tale.

Once upon a time, there was a lone boy– utterly hopeless and beyond saving. A boy who spewed nonsense just to go on living, relying on nothing but his horribly twisted personality and hideously fractured set of values.

Once upon a time, there was a lone girl– utterly hopeless and beyond saving. A girl who smiled innocently just to go on living, relying on nothing but her horribly straight-forward personality and hideously right set of values.

Normally, that's where the tale would end. The boy would live out his short, relatively miserable, relatively tragic life, and the girl would live out her short, relatively happy, relatively comfortable life. The world the boy lived in and the world the girl lived in were entirely separate, after all.

Only, against all reason, the boy met the girl, and the girl met the boy. In the end, how did it happen? Who made it so? By whose whim did these two meet? Whose interest? It would be far too cruel to the two of them to chalk it up to mere coincidence, fate, or miracle.

Many people died.

Lots of other things died as well.

The boy died a lot.

The girl died a lot as well.

The boy killed a lot.

The girl killed no one.

And so, the boy, unable to bear the weight of sin, unable to bear the weight of punishment, fled on his own.

Leaving the girl behind, he fled on his own.

"—just a commonplace tale…"

I made it sound like a tragedy where I was the only victim.

Like I carried the weight of the world's sadness on my shoulders.

Like I had sole rights to all the world's misfortune.

Always the poor, pitiable victim.

Even though I was the wrongdoer. Even though I was the wrongdoer. Even though I was the wrongdoer.

Even though I wasn't pitiable at all.

"There's people like me everywhere…"

Alone, I mumbled to myself.

My left arm, wrapped and swaddled in a needlessly large bandage. Although, maybe it wasn't so needless after all. If anything, Miss Kokoromi had said this was merely a stopgap measure. Even though the dog's fangs never did end up reaching my bone, because of its fearsome bite strength, it seemed like the radius in my left arm had experienced an avulsion fracture. Of course, that's not where my list of injuries ends. Given how many times I tumbled down that stairwell, I suppose this should come as no surprise, but apparently my body was injured all over. *'Apparently,'* makes it sound like I am talking about someone else, but in truth, I hadn't really noticed. My sense of pain had mostly returned, but since Miss Kokoromi had loaded me up with so many pain killers, my nerves were numb all over again.

"Still, wounds like this would normally have ya writhin' in pain,"

Miss Kokoromi said. And if a renowned anatomy professor thought so, then who was I to argue? But if that were true, then maybe something was wrong with my body after all. Honestly, it was to the point where I was tempted to ask Miss Kokoromi to crack me open and take a look.

Those were the kinds of thoughts I had as I stood alone on the roof of Neo's research ward— the Fifth Ward.

Even still, it was all too nonsensical. What on earth happens now? You could claim this farce of an ending was predictable; you could also claim the opposite. And by farce, I mean everything that led up to this point— all the developments that I'd brought about in my half-day in the leading role.

Which is to say, the very instant I understood everything—

everything in its entirety— the farce had come to a close. There was no need for a curtain call. There was no need to lower the curtains in the first place. Everything had ended in that very moment.

If so, this scene that was about to play out– what would you even call it?

"If anything, this is more like a footnote…"

No, that's not it-

If anything, this was foreshadowing. This was foreshadowing the start of something- something big. An inevitable rite of passage. Thinking of it that way, even a nonsensical scene like this had some meaning to it, or so I came to believe. That said, meaning or not, I had no intention of complaining either way.

Now then, *here we go.*

Time for the Nonsense User's once-in-a-lifetime puppet show.

First, the two metres between the Fifth and Fourth Wards. I had long since learned that such a jump was child's play. With only a slight run-up, I cleared the gap. The impact on my legs was noticeable, but not enough to worry about. Fortunately, the painkillers still seemed to be working.

The Fourth Ward. The place Kunagisa, Suzunashi, and I were confined. All-in-all, I couldn't help feeling like we'd done Suzunashi wrong. Something like this happening to Kunagisa and I was almost a forgone conclusion, but she truly had nothing to do with this. It wasn't fair to drag her into it like this. Suzunashi wasn't as forgiving as Miiko, so in all likelihood, I was in for a lecture once all of this was over. Well, whatever. It's not like I hated being lectured. Especially when it was by Suzunashi.

Next, the leap from the Fourth Ward to the Third. This one was three and a half metres so I had to be careful. Conversely, this was the kind of jump anyone could manage so long as they were careful.

The Third Ward. Miss Miyoshi Kokoromi's turf. I couldn't tell you how she felt about it, but I can assure you, honestly and truly, that being reunited with her was something I never wished for. Not because I hated her. I think. I just didn't want to see her. Honestly, never again. Still, had she never been here… Perhaps our reunion had been worth something after all.

Continuing from the Third Ward to the Second. Not even two metres.

Much like the distance between the Fifth and Fourth Wards, this one was a cakewalk.

The Second Ward was— Koutari's Ward. Koutari Hinayoshi. I thought back on all he did. And on the conversation between him and the *'scoundrel',* Neo that we heard over the transceiver. *'Utsurigi's death was a suicide.'*

"Even for a suicide, it's rare to see one that's so suicidal…"

I muttered, but I didn't really buy it. Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. You'd be right either way. You'd be wrong either way. In the end, that too, was all a matter of perception.

From the Second Ward to the Primary Ward was a little under three metres.

What came to mind next was Hime. My *'self-proclaimed'* disciple, who I'd left in charge of things once I was gone.

If it was Hime, she'd certainly understand what I was going through. That girl had faintly reminded me of Tomo, but inside, she was far more similar to me. Our chance meeting last month had led to her just recently moving into the first floor of the same antique apartment where I lived. She enlisted me as her in-home tutor, but progress was slow going. It turns out teaching someone who hates learning was no easy task. And yet, that's what I was about to do. What I *had* to do for Professor Shadou Kyouichirou, I thought as I stood on the roof of the professor's presiding Primary Ward.

I turned to face the Sixth Ward. One and a half metres. This was even less than child's play.

Once I'd made my way over, I could see across to the Seventh Ward's rooftop. There, I could make out the shapes of several figures. They were both the audience, and the players in my puppet show. Put another way, they were the subjects I aimed to tame with my nonsense. Supposing that was even possible. As I thought about it, I was reminded of the woman in the denim coat. If we're counting all the people *'I would have failed without'* she would, without a doubt, wear the crown, even though it had ultimately ended with us falling out. That was my responsibility and my responsibility alone. As such, it was likely my responsibility to do what little I could to pay her back.

On the subject of the woman known as *'Ishimaru Kouta'*, I decided to feign complete ignorance. Since Shito and Misachi had seen her, there was no way to conceal her presence at the facility entirely, but if I confessed to being

associated with her, that would also necessitate confessing everything about Neo as well. Realizing how bad that would be, I luckily had an out by making it seem like *'I had freed myself from the cage using the lockpicking knife'* and *'got around the facility by wandering around on the rooftops.'* Of course, that explanation was rather clumsy, but since they were so off-put by the presence of an *intruder*, they seemed to buy the story wholesale, inconsistencies and all.

"Even for someone who enjoys inconsistency as much as I do, this is pushing it, isn't it—?" I muttered self-deprecatingly. "—No, in this case, it's more inconvenience than inconsistency."

From the Sixth Ward to the Seventh was five metres. However, factoring in the Seventh Ward's height, you'd be better off thinking of it as four and a half.

After talking to Kunagisa, it seems that the national average for high school boys' long jump was a similar distance. Knowing that, I felt a little more at ease about it. Say what you will about my lack of exercise lately, but I don't recall letting my body deteriorate to the point where I'd ever lose to a seventeen-year-old. Now, just because I don't recall it happening doesn't mean it didn't happen, but regardless, I'd made the jump once already. I may have completely lost myself in the moment, but there's no denying that I made the jump. No matter how you look at it, having already succeeded once was certainly encouraging. Out of caution, I took a generous approach.

Success in long jump wasn't solely the result of good leg strength, Kunagisa had said. The momentum from my run-up would become the force required to propel me through the air. Apparently, it all came down to technique. The technique in question involved reaching top speed halfway through your approach before slowly transitioning your centre of gravity to your upper half— or at least that's what Kunagisa's long-jump lecture taught me, but even if you could conceptualize it in your head, it was hard to put into practice. To someone experienced, they would view it as a *plain old jump*, but there was no way an amateur like me would be able to replicate it quite so simply. And so, I decided to go with my version of a *plain old jump* as well.

I took off running— then planted a foot.

My body- floated.

A slight commotion could be heard. Someone must have cried out. Others were silent. I had plenty of time to consider such trivial things. The time I spent in the air seemed to stretch on and on. They often say, when people feel like their life is in danger, they see the world in slow motion; at

that moment, I was likely experiencing exactly that. Either that, or I simply hadn't jumped far enough and was plummeting head-over-heels towards the ground below. Either was fine by me, although it really shouldn't have been.

Finally, and perhaps fortunately, I landed on the roof of the Seventh Ward. To be precise, I didn't so much as land as clumsily tumble over myself. My injured left arm took the brunt of the collision with the roof's surface, and while I didn't lose consciousness, I did bang my head a little and spent a short while writhing there in pain. I had made a horrifically uncool entrance.

"What in the Sam Hill are ya doin', Kiddo?" Miss Kokoromi sounded utterly amazed as she made her way to my side. "Y'alright? What're ya thinkin', landin' on your bad side like that?"

"I'm fine— more importantly,"

I said, taking Miss Kokoromi's hand as she helped me up. Propping myself up on her shoulder, I turned to face everyone else. The professor, Shadou Kyouichirou. The secretary, Uze Misachi. The assistant, Ougaki Shito. The researchers, Neo Furuara, Koutari Hinayoshi, and Kasugai Kasuga. And, a little bit off to the side, Suzunashi Neon– and Kunagisa Tomo. Nine people all together- ten, if you include me- were gathered on the roof of the Seventh Ward. Naturally, the one who had gathered them here was none other than myself.

"—Well, as I'm sure you saw for yourself," I said as I stood up straight, spreading my arms wide in a grand gesture as if surveying the whole group. I had largely done so to give the appearance that I was *unharmed*. "By sticking to the rooftops like this, it's possible to access the Seventh Ward from any of the others. Are we all following?"

"–Hmph," I shouldn't need to tell you that the interjection came from Professor Kyouichirou. He looked and sounded annoyed as he scowled at me. "Preposterous. How utterly preposterous, you whelp."

"A whelp, am I? Harsh," I took the insult in stride; I had to do whatever I could to bypass my emotional circuits, "but if we don't acknowledge reality, then we can't move on, professor."

"Do you really think I'd fall for a trick that would barely work on children— No, that's being too generous, even children would see through it. From where I'm standing, it's blindingly obvious. The Seventh Ward was built ever-so-slightly shorter than the Sixth. You may have proved it possible to leap from there to here, but you've done nothing to prove the opposite."

Leave it to the professor. Unlike me, he noticed the difference immediately. It would be easiest if I could wrap this up with a Q.E.D. right now, but it didn't look like things were going to be that convenient.

"Or do you intend to demonstrate that jump right now?"

"No, no… That would be impossible. You're correct."

*'I told you so,'* the professor's sneer said.

"What a complete waste of time. To think, I humoured you thus far- I must have gone soft."

Soft— you're completely right.

Even if it was just the result of underestimating his opponent and the misplaced sense of ease that came with it, Shadou Kyouichirou's softness was undeniable. To let me— his enemy— move about freely like this? If that's not soft, I don't know what is. So, forgive me if I take full advantage of it.

"Now, now, I wouldn't be so quick to jump to conclusions," I said. "Still— you have a point, professor. It's not possible to return to the Sixth Ward from the Seventh. Not unless one of us has world-class leg strength, that is. However, I believe what I did does prove something. Namely, *even if you can't return, there is a route into the Seventh Ward.*"

"And what of it?" the professor interrupted. "What use is there in a one-way-trip? It goes without saying, but to even exit the building, one would have to bypass numerous locks. And even supposing they did, it would have left behind a log. We have a log for every entrance and exit. And yet, there's nothing of the sort."

"There isn't, is there. I suppose you're right," I agreed disinterestedly. "The logs and the lock acts as a kind of double-bind. So, let's go with that for now."

"Oh? What are you implying? Are you suggesting that I, Shadou Kyouichirou, tampered with the logs? That I deleted them?"

"I'm suggesting nothing of the sort. Besides, you wouldn't have been able to, would you? While Kunagisa could've pulled it off, you couldn't. Right? Even though Kunagisa would've found it easy. You said as much yourself, professor."

That line may have been a little cruel, because the professor's face

hardened into an intense glare. However, rather than anger, his expression was closer to one of frustration over not being able to predict what cards I would play next.

"You, wretch—"

"What's more—" I spoke over him, "It's still too early to conclude they *'couldn't return'*. After all, there's no rule that says we have to make the jump relying on physical strength alone. If they used a rope, for example, the route to the Sixth Ward would be more than possible."

"It most certainly would not. If you're implying they had a rope that could bear their whole weight, then where is it?"

"Admittedly, you wouldn't find any at the facility… but when I say rope, it's more of a metaphor. For instance, they could've tied their clothes together to use as a rope, or twisted a handful of computer cables together."

"And you think that would bear someone's weight?"

"No," I said, taking my eyes off the professor— and turning to face Koutari. "However, if we're talking about a candidate for a rope that could bear someone's weight– as the professor so elegantly put it– then how about human hair?"

All at once, everyone's gaze landed on Koutari. However, Koutari just adjusted his sunglasses and remained silent. He was as untalkative as ever. Somewhat taken aback by his excessive commitment to silence, I continued.

"Koutari's hair was just long enough. If you were to tie it together, you could create a bridge between here and the Sixth Ward— don't you agree? What do you think, Suzunashi?"

"…Hm?" She seemed somewhat surprised. "You're asking me? Then, sure… hair is certainly strong enough. Although that depends on the person, I guess. Speaking of, I've seen Miiko choke someone out with that samurai ponytail of hers."

"Exactly. Although, that's definitely a situation I'm glad not to have been witness to… According to records, a woman once did an experiment to find out how much weight her hair could withstand if she gathered it all together. Apparently, it held up to one tonne before tearing." This was also second-hand information I got from Kunagisa. "That's an extreme case, not the norm, but regardless, using a rope made of human hair would be entirely

feasible. Although…”

This time I set my sights on Kasugai. The rest followed suit.

“If they weren’t a human, but rather an animal, jumping this gap may have been possible. Just look at this…” I said, raising my bandage-wrapped arm for everyone to see. “You can’t honestly claim a massive dog, like the one that nearly killed me, wouldn’t at least have a chance of being able to jump a gap like this, can you, Kasugai?”

“Who knows? I’ve never tried but I suppose it might be possible,” Kasugai tilted her head as she replied. “If that were true would that make me your suspect?”

“No, I wouldn’t go that far quite yet. All I’m trying to say is that the Seventh Ward was never a locked room– it was never completely closed off. Those were just some specific examples. If so, what now? At the very least, there’s no more reason for Kunagisa— no, all three of us, to be the only ones who are—”

“That’s the oldest trick in the book,” none of what I’d said so far seemed to surprise him as he interrupted derisively. “You **fabricate** some miraculous-sounding hypothesis, and convince people the shock they feel is merely the astonishment of finally understanding the truth. All that showboating by jumping to the Seventh Ward was part of it, was it not? This is a typical con-artist’s tactic. Well, I’m not biting, whelp.”

“Fabricated— you say?”

“Exactly. It’s obvious if you try thinking about it. Both of your hypotheses fall apart with only a little thought. Koutari’s hair may have been long, but it was still only a metre at most. Even if you divided it up to make a rope while still leaving it strong enough to hold someone, the limit would only be around four metres. That doesn’t quite cut it. And your animal-culprit theory is even more laughable. Care to enlighten us on how a dog would be capable of butchering someone, crucifying them to the wall, then writing a message in the victim’s blood?”

“Well then— what if someone was riding on the dog’s back?”

“I don’t think that would be possible.” Kasugai took my joke seriously. Maybe she was kinder than I thought. “It couldn’t jump that far while carrying someone else.”

“…Thank you for telling me,” I bowed my head. “I’ll take that into

consideration."

"So? What's next, whelp? Don't tell me you're out of cards already."

"In that case— how about something like this? Let's try and understand the reason why the killer found it necessary to mutilate Utsurigi Gaisuke so savagely. Why did they carve open his stomach? What if it was so they could **tear out his organs**?"

I said, making a series of theatric gestures for those present. I was almost chewing the scenery as bad as Neo, but then again, you can never go too far with these kinds of things.

"Tear out his organs—?" Miss Kokoromi asked doubtfully. "What are ya goin' on about, Kiddo?"

"The human digestive tract is like one long tube, is it not? One long tube that stretches from the esophagus to the rectum. What's more, being made of flesh, this tube is suitably elastic– and that elasticity gives it considerable strength. Suppose, **instead of a rope, the killer used—**"

"Huh? Hold your horses," Miss Kokoromi cut me short. "Utsurigi's organs were all accounted for. I dissected his stomach and intestines m'self."

"Precisely. This was all just another theory." I said, raising my hands. "Using intestines as a rope isn't all that practical, let alone possible… It was a bad joke, okay? What you would call lip service. Still, trying to understand why the killer tore up his body isn't a bad idea on its own. I have no intention of having you all stand here listening to a lecture on criminal psychology from a whelp like me, but… don't you think there's something to the fact that Utsurigi's murder seemed almost obsessive?"

"Something to it?" Professor Kyouichirou sounded a little irritated. "What's with you and never getting to the point? You're just beating around the bush. Do you have something to say? If so, then be a man and spit it out already."

"Be a man? Naturally, I can't say I'm all too offended, but…" I languidly shrugged my shoulders. Beating around the bush, huh? Unfortunately, there were topics I had to avoid, so there was no helping it. "Come to think of it, I can't say the professor's hypothesis is all that manly either. The whole *'it wouldn't have been impossible for Kunagisa'* thing… it's a bit of a stretch. And even if she could have done it, that's not reason enough to conclude that you— the lot of you— couldn't have done it as well. All you've done is insist **it can't be done**."

"…And that's your solution?"

"No, that was just me nitpicking. No deeper meaning than that. Not yet, at least."

My constant proposal of half-assed theories only to immediately retract them caused the professor to gaze at me with a look of mild bewilderment, but he held his tongue. Ultimately, that was my true goal all along. I sought to hide my true intent behind a smokescreen until the very last second. To muster as much false bravado as I could and utterly baffle the professor– as well as everyone else. To confuse them. To disorient them. To ensure we didn't stand on equal footing.

"Miss," I called out to Miss Kokoromi, "why don't you take this opportunity to share the results of Utsurigi's autopsy?"

"Hm? Ah- let's see– The time o' death was around one in the mornin'. Cause o' death was the scissors that were jabbed through his eyes and into his brain. The whole business with his stomach came later. The arms getting lopped off took place after that, and the crucifixion was done last. That's pretty much the short of it."

It was information I'd already heard back in the Third Ward. However, that had to remain a secret. Miss Kokoromi understood and gave an impromptu explanation, not for my sake, but for the sake of everyone else. It was never my intention, nor was it necessarily true, but it somehow felt like Miss Kokoromi and I had wound up accomplices in all this. And that relationship, too, likely had nothing to do with trust.

"If y'ask me, the part I'm most curious about is the time lag before chopping off his arms. They were severed three or four hours after death. It don't take nearly that long to do the deed, so why the hold up—?"

"Alright, that's more than enough, Miyoshi," the professor chided, "I don't know what kind of relationship you two had, but I won't have you taking his side."

"I ain't," she grinned sardonically, "but have it your way. I won't speak out of turn. Now then, havin' heard Utsurigi's autopsy report, whatcha fixin' on doing with it, kiddo?"

"I'm **fixin'** to do whatever I can— Speaking of, wouldn't mangling a body that badly and crucifying it take a considerable amount of strength?"

"Are you trying to suggest that Lady Kunagisa's scrawny arms

exonerate her?" The one to answer my question was professor Kyouichirou, possibly in an attempt to keep Miss Kokoromi from saying anything further. "Hah. I've had enough of you splitting hairs. There's no need for Lady Kunagisa to have carried out the act herself. So long as she could bypass the door, then anyone could have done it. Like **you** for example."

"Exactly. I don't intend to fight you on that," I didn't fall for his bait. Earlier—this morning, when I let him provoke me and lost my temper– that was my first big mistake. I wouldn't be making it again. Not so long as I could help it. "Still, the question why Utsurigi was so viciously mutilated remains."

"Are you saying you know the answer?"

"Let's save that for later. Now then, no point spending too much more time on this— it'll start getting tedious— how about we finally get to the solution. It's a fact— an unshakeable fact that not only the Seventh Ward, but every building in the facility has next to no means of entry. You could even call them virtually impregnable. Given the lack of windows— by their very nature, they have only one entrance. An entrance locked by a security system of Kunagisa Tomo's design no less. Now, set aside the lock for the time being; you'll find that the only ways in or out of the building would be this roof and the entrance. Like one big tunnel to heaven. Professor Kyouichirou's theory is that whoever killed Utsurigi came and went through the entrance." I glanced over at him. He said nothing, so I continued. "If that were true, then it would be impossible for the culprits to be anyone other than Kunagisa Tomo and her companions, but well, as one of her companions, I reject that outright. I'm sure the professor will claim this is just *collusion*, but I can vouch for her innocence. No, I *know* of her innocence. That means that the entrance is out of the question."

"So, you reckon they must've taken the rooftop route?"

"Miyoshi!" the professor hollered. "That's quite enough! You're completely out of line!"

"My bad, I s'ppose no one asked for my opinion."

Miss Kokoromi, half-heartedly bowed her head. As someone who'd already decided to cut ties with the professor, it was probably more convenient for her if my little puppet show succeeded. In that sense, the two of us might actually be accomplices after all, I thought.

"Yes, that's right. That said— it's not like that route doesn't come with its own strict limitations." I muttered, turning to face the Sixth Ward that I had just come from. "I'm sure I don't need to explain what those limitations

are, now do I?"

The question wasn't addressed to anyone in particular, so it went unanswered. Still, I let it sit for a little while before the professor finally spoke up. "Like I said, this route is a one-way-trip," he sounded irritated. "Even if you could make it here, there would be no going back, that's—"

"No. Well, I suppose that's also an issue. You're right, there would be no going back— But, if you'd just think about it, you'd realize *making it here* is no easy feat either."

"—What?"

"Going from the Fifth Ward to the Primary Ward, and finally to the Sixth Ward– the furthest you'd have to jump is around three and a half metres. Anybody here could pull that off— however, the same can't be said for the last jump—"

Five metres—Four and a half if we factor in the angle. Far enough to give the high school boy's average a run for its money— That said, an average is only an average when there's deviation. We're not talking about the minimum distance anyone could clear. In fact, it was the opposite; it meant that around half of them couldn't.

In other words, when it came to this four-and-a-half-metre jump, there were those who **could** clear it, and those who **could not**—

"As you all saw, I was able to make the jump. Despite how I look now, back in the day— I guess you all know already, so I'll just come out and say it— I studied abroad as part of the ER3 System's adolescent cultivation project, the ER Program, for five years. As part of that program, I had to keep myself reasonably fit, and as a result— I've managed to maintain a moderate level of fitness even now."

I did pick up a bit of an accent though, I added jokingly.

"Let's see. Excuse me, Suzunashi," I turned my questioning on her once again. "If you wanted to, do you think you could jump this distance?"

"I probably could," as if she were expecting the question this time, she answered immediately. "I haven't actually tested it or anything, but I could probably do up to five metres easily. If it were six metres— that's where I'd draw the line. I'm pretty sure, anyway."

"I see."

Even as an amateur when it came to long-jumping, Suzunashi was unusually tall, she had long legs, and was in good shape, so her answer came as no surprise. She could probably jump even further than me, I thought. I nodded my head and turned to face Kunagisa.

"Tomo, what about you?"

"Uhhh– not a chance," Kunagisa pursed her lips and answered, sounding a little miffed. It was as if she were saying, *'why make me admit it?'* "I probably couldn't even jump one metre."

This was also to be expected. Kunagisa was tiny on top of being a shut-in and a fussy eater who often skipped meals; she never had much in the way of muscles or leg strength. "You see," I turned back to face the professor.

"Even amongst the three of us, we all have different levels of ability. That said, if we assume they took the *rooftop route*, then our innocence is proven. After all, you can't take this route unless you **start in one of the wards**. And since every research ward was locked tight, we couldn't have gotten inside."

"Are you saying one of us is the culprit?"

The professor said, scowling at me.

"I've been saying that this whole time, haven't I?"

I replied indifferently.

"Then who? Spit it out."

"I'm getting there. Don't rush me. This is the **end**, so we might as well enjoy it. —Now then, who do you think we should count out? Professor Shadou Kyouichirou, his secretary, Uze Misachi, his assistant, Ougaki Shito, Miss Miyoshi Kokoromi, or the other researchers, Neo Furuara, Koutari Hinayoshi, or Kasugai Kasuga—?" I narrowed my eyes at them as I said their names one by one. "—Let's start by removing the three women. In other words, Miss Kokoromi, Kasugai, and Misachi."

"____" "……" "……"

All three of them were silent.

"It's simply a matter of physique… the three of them are all quite petite. And I don't mean to sound sexist, but there's also the matter of innate

strength to consider. It would be far too risky for a woman to try and pull off this level of acrobatics."

Somehow, I felt as though I could feel Suzunashi's glare coming from my right, but I ignored it. It wouldn't do me any good to lose my nerve by thinking about the repercussions I would face later. Nonetheless, I was very clearly being glared at. Bear with it, this is a vital situation. I shook my head gently before saying, "let's continue,"

"Neo's out too. This is also a matter of physique," let's see. What's the best way to put this? "Neo's a bit larger than most, you see…"

"You can say that again," Neo responded to my hesitance by slapping his belly and letting out an exaggerated laugh. "It'd be like doing long-jump with an extra twenty kilos on your back. I never would've made it. I guess that means you can scratch me off your list of suspects as well."

"…In that case, we're left with three. Professor Shadou Kyouichirou, the assistant, Ougaki Shito, and the researcher, Koutari Hinayoshi. …Of the three of them, the one we can most easily rule out would be you, professor."

"…And why is that?"

"If you mean to tell me you could make that jump, then by all means go ahead, but you're no spring chicken, professor. Sixty-three years old… you've got to admit it would be difficult."

The professor was silent. However, there was no need to wait on an answer. After all, anybody could tell the professor wouldn't have been able to make this jump just by looking at him."

"That leaves us with two—"

Koutari and Shito.

All eyes were on them.

"It's possible for these two to have taken the rooftop route— to be specific, Shito would've crossed over from the Primary Ward to the Sixth Ward, and finally to the Seventh Ward. Koutari's route would've gone: Second Ward, Primary Ward, Sixth Ward and then Seventh Ward, but he still could have made it here—"

As I spoke, I made note of their condition. Koutari looked the exact same as he had a little while ago. He seemed completely unshaken as he

carefully readjusted the position of his sunglasses. He looked like composure itself. Shito, on the other hand, did not. His face had gone beet-red with anger and he cut me off with a shout,

"Oi, asshole! Don't think I'll just shut-up and take it while you say whatever you want about me—!"

"Sorry, now's not the time for our back-and-forth comedy routine. Can you just keep quiet and listen for a second?"

"The fuck did you just say? Listen here, asshole—"

"Relax. **You** couldn't have taken this route either." I held up one hand to appease the furious Shito, still speaking calmly all the while. "You have a **vision** problem."

"Wha-" at that single word, *'vision'*, Shito deflated. "—What?"

"Your vision… you can't see very well, can you?" I answered, trying my best to sound as if it were simply common knowledge. "I doubt it's an issue with the lenses of your glasses or your eyes… so I'd guess it's likely a neurological problem. I was never the best at anatomy, so I couldn't tell you the specifics."

A slight murmur arose amongst all who were present. Those in the know were glancing at me, and those who were out of the loop had their eyes set on Shito. Among those from the facility, it seems Misachi and Kasugai were the only ones who hadn't known. As for the outsiders, Suzunashi didn't seem to have noticed, but Kunagisa seemed like she had already figured it out. Given Kunagisa's insightfulness, it was certainly possible.

"Bastard… how did you—"

"It just came to me, that's all there was to it."

Consider how close he had to get to confirm who I was during our first meeting, or how he had to prod at Kunagisa to check, or how he wasn't able to tell whether Suzunashi was a man or a woman just because she was tall. And then there's also the fact that noticing Kouta and I hiding in the blind spot behind the water tank wouldn't have been possible for anyone who relied on their eyesight day in and day out. Or how despite that, he couldn't discern Kouta's gender either just because she happened to be tall like Suzunashi. Perhaps that was the reason Kouta had focused her attacks on Shito's abdomen and had avoided his head. Taking all that together, it really *'just came to me'*.

"Am I wrong?"

"—No, but…"

An optic nerve abnormality resulting in loss of vision. Whether it was congenital or something acquired was more than I could determine. That said, even if it ended up being the result of the professor's *human experimentation*, it wasn't for me to know. It was none of my business. Essentially, Shito could only **faintly** make out people or his surroundings. Given the way I saw him navigate the facility, he couldn't be completely blind… still, with his condition…

"Then we should assume you wouldn't have been able to make the jump."

"H-hey, I'll admit that you're right about me, but… but that would mean," the anger in Shito's voice had somewhat subsided, but it was replaced with a confused panic. "That would mean the only one left is—"

"That's right. Only one left. Koutari," I pointed in his direction. "—Now then— what about him? If we were to try and search for issues of gender, physique, age, senses, or any other suitably compelling reason why he wouldn't be able to make this jump, I think you'll find—"

Koutari. He didn't move a muscle. He didn't scowl. He didn't get angry. He didn't show any reaction whatsoever.

"—**none**."

The sudden remark didn't come from me.

But from Koutari himself.

"That's right, I don't have an excuse."

"—Koutari!" the professor barked. "What are you saying!? You—"

"Please calm yourself, professor," Koutari said in a tone dispassionate enough to rival my own. "He's simply shown that I would have been able to make it across. That's all. Isn't that right, Loverboy?"

Loverboy. At a time like this, those deeply cynical words cut deeper than ever, making me shiver. After all. He was bringing up Kunagisa.

The distance between the two of us was roughly five metres, or

maybe six. It might be better if I got a little closer. With that in mind, I took one step towards him. Standing directly across from him.

From here on out— my opponent wasn't the professor.

From here on out, my opponent was Koutari Hinayoshi.

"Or is it that you're accusing me of being the culprit?"

Spoken like a true culprit.

"That's right. I'm saying you did it, Koutari."

Spoken like a true detective.

I could hear the professor shouting, but I paid him no mind. I took one more step towards Koutari. There was no point getting any closer. Four and a half metres lay between us— how fitting.

"—Amusing. If you're so insistent that I'm the culprit, then go ahead, try and prove it, Loverboy," Koutari said, his facial expression unchanging. "I admit I was the only one who could've taken this route. After all, my name means *'the feet of god'*. However, as the professor already said— and as you yourself admitted— there would be no way back."

"No way back, huh…" I repeated his words. "—That's assuming you would even need to return in the first place."

"……"

Koutari didn't respond.

"…No, of course you would have had to. Otherwise, the logs left on the central computer wouldn't add up. Suppose, after you murdered Utsurigi, you waited around until Shito discovered the body and then snuck out the entrance… but that wouldn't work either. Since the doors lock automatically, you would have had to leave immediately after they opened, and it'd be difficult to slip out without Shito noticing. Even if you made use of a blind spot, Shito would've noticed anyway." Just like he had discovered Kouta and I. "Even if fortune was on your side and you managed to make it out of the Seventh Ward, you wouldn't have been able to get back into the Second Ward. Not because you couldn't open the door, but because it would have been recorded in the logs."

"I'm already sick and tired of listening to your impossible theories,"

the professor wasn't simply trying to shut me up, he genuinely sounded exhausted. "Give it up already. I don't have time to play along with any more of your nonsense—"

"That's a shame, but unfortunately, just as you are *The Mad Daemon*, I am the *Nonsense User*. Still, there's no need to worry, we're nearly there. We'll be arriving at our last stop shortly," that's all I had to say to the professor before turning my attention back on Koutari. "Let's back up a bit— why did the killer mutilate Utsurigi Gaisuke's body so badly? Was it out of malice? For a sense of control? Some kind of ritual? Whatever the case, I don't really care. However, there's one thing I'm curious about— that being the reason why the culprit stole his arms."

His face unmoving, Koutari didn't answer.

"Perhaps they wanted the *hands* of a once-great cyber terrorist— in the literal sense. However, such a romantic interpretation seems a bit too far-fetched… My first thought was that it was done to hide evidence of a cadaveric spasm. A cadaveric spasm being—" my eyes flitted over to Miss Kokoromi. "—a phenomenon where a violent death causes a body to undergo instantaneous rigor mortis. If the victim is firmly griping onto something as they're murdered, then that's how they would stay. So, if that something happened to be a button from the culprit's lab coat or a name tag, then that would serve as unshakeable evidence that the culprit would have to dispose of at all costs."

"So, you're saying Utsurigi's was clutching onto some kind of vital clue?" Suzunashi asked. "Then wouldn't it be easier to just cut the hands off at the wrist? Or you could get back what's inside by cutting off the fingers. Listen, Inoji, I'm getting close to my limit here too. Could you dumb it down a bit?"

"Sorry," I apologized. How lame. "Let's see, the reason why they couldn't cut off the arms or fingers would be that that would be the exact kind of thing to raise suspicion about there being a cadaveric spasm. By cutting the arms off at the shoulders, they had somewhat covered up–…or rather, misled everyone about its true purpose— or so I thought."

"Or so you thought?"

"Just think about it, Suzunashi… Utsurigi's cause of death– it was the scissors jammed through his eyes. That makes the whole theory fall apart."

"Why? Sounds pretty violent to me."

"I thought so too, that's not the issue… the problem is this: there isn't a person alive who, in a life-or-death situation like having **a pair of blades thrust towards their eyeballs**," I made a scissors hand-gesture and pointed them towards my own eyes, "would think to reach for a button or lapel…"

"Ahh… you're right," Suzunashi nodded. "The first thing you'd do is grab your **attacker's arms** to try and defend yourself. Hmm… now that it's been said out loud, it seems obvious. But in that case, why were the arms cut off?"

"That's not the only question either. Like Miss Kokoromi said earlier, why was there a time lag before they did it? Allow me to clear up that question right away. They were simply **waiting for the rain to stop**."

"—the rain?"

"Yes, the rain. If they took the rooftop route, the return trip would've been dangerous enough as is, but last night it rained quite heavily." Kouta had said that the fact the arms were cut off all that time later meant that it must have been raining by the time they left, but the opposite interpretation was possible as well. In other words, **because it was already raining,** they chose to wait before cutting off the arms. "But the rain had already stopped by the time the sun came out— That's right, the killer really shouldn't have picked such a rainy night to commit a murder. Don't you agree, Koutari?"

"Who knows?" he kept his replies brief. "I can't say I follow."

"—Still, there was a reason they had to kill him that night. That was because they couldn't be sure when the **three** of us would be going home. If they had missed their chance last night and we decided to leave today— then they wouldn't have had a scapegoat **to pin the blame on**."

"……"

"Fortunately, the rain stopped. All you had to do then was head back."

"But how! That's what we've been asking this whole time!"

The professor finally exploded and hurled his cane at me. It seems he had finally reached his wits end. The wooden cane directly struck the bandaged portion of my left arm. The painkillers were still doing their job so it didn't hurt, but the force of impact made me stumble two or three steps back. There's a chance that my arm was now well and truly broken.

Like Suzunashi had done this morning, I just glared at him without saying a word.

"—What? Those eyes. Why do you— who do you think you are?" I didn't throw anything in return, but nonetheless, the professor took a few steps back. As he did, he bumped into Misachi and stopped. "How dare a whelp like you have their eyes?"

Their eyes? Who was he talking about? Surely not Suzunashi. Perhaps Utsurigi. Or maybe Kunagisa Tomo or Nao when they were younger. I didn't know. I didn't care to know. I didn't care who it was.

"—Looking at it from the Sixth Ward," I said. "It's surprisingly easy to miss. The fact that it's a one-way trip, that is. What if Koutari— no, that hasn't been decided yet— What if our culprit didn't realize they couldn't get back until they'd already made it across? What would they do then? Simple. They'd use a rope."

"……How! I told you there's no such thi—!"

"As I pointed out earlier, Koutari could have used his hair."

"And as I pointed out earlier, it wouldn't be long enou—!"

"**If it's not long enough, just make it longer**. For example—

—**using Utsurigi's arms**."

As expected— no one had anything to say. In all likelihood, not a one of them could have ever predicted that was what I was going to say— no. I suppose it's possible one of them had. Just one. I turned to face them-

-to face Koutari Hinayoshi.

"You fashioned a rope out of your hair then fastened one of his arms on each end. I can't tell you the average arm span of a grown man— However, if we use my arms as a benchmark, then they should have been sixty to seventy centimetres each. Together they would have been around one metre and thirty centimetres— correct? Add that to the length of the hair and it would have been more than enough to reach the Sixth Ward. And don't tell me part of a human body wouldn't be able to support a human's weight. Right, Koutari?" Without answering, Koutari readjusted his sunglasses. I

continued. “Using a rope or some kind of substitute comes with its own problems— namely, since the Sixth Ward has no railing, you’d need a hook in order to snag it on the roof. Except, if Utsurigi’s arm was attached to the end of the rope— then you’d be in the clear. If **Utsurigi had a cadaveric spasm while gripping your arms**, then his hands would’ve been frozen in a perfect hook-shape. You would’ve been more than capable of using that to hook onto the lip of the eavestrough that runs along the edge—”

“—Even nonsense has its limits!”

The professor– *Mad Daemon* Shadou Kyouichirou stomped his foot as hard as he could and shouted breathlessly. Misachi made an attempt to hold him back, but was thrown aside. “You don’t honestly expect us to believe something so impractical— contrived— absurd— and far-fetched— do you!?”

“Impractical? Contrived? Absurd? Far-fetched? That’s exactly what it is!” I replied emphatically. “And yet, professor, there is no way the solution to a case involving none other than Shadou Kyouichirou, Utsurigi Gaisuke, and Kunagisa Tomo could be anything but *impractical*, *contrived*, *absurd*, *far-fetched*, and *psycho logical*! That is the one and only truth of this facility!”

“Preposterous…what a load of rubbish! Or are you honestly suggesting that’s what happened!?”

“It’s not a matter of **what happened**. It’s not a matter of **what didn’t happen** either. It’s not even a matter of the act itself. It’s all a matter of perception. Isn’t that right, Koutari!?”

“B-be quiet!” the professor’s face contorted in anger. He turned red, and then pale. “Ko…Koutari! Say something! Tell this laughable brat he’s wrong—”

“……”

Koutari didn’t respond to his words either. Then, he raised his head only slightly and spoke to me.

“…and your proof? Any evidence I did what you claim?”

“Proof, huh… Sure, something as minor as you cutting your hair doesn’t prove anything, but—” I pointed at him. “If my thinking is correct, then one of your arms should still bear Utsurigi’s hand print. One left by the tight grip caused by his cadaveric spasm.”

"……"

"Koutari!"

The professor yelled once more.

"Tell him he's wrong! Hurry, roll up your sleeves and show him you're innocent! Once you do, we'll make sure this brat never leaves his cage again! We'll lock him deep, deep, underground and thoroughly, and I do mean thoroughly—"

"—well, I'd say you score a sixty."

All at once, the deep voice Koutari had been using until now was replaced with something lighter.

"Koutar—"

"Sixty points. You should be grateful for that much. You were far too clumsy and took way too long."

"—Then you have my gratitude." I shrugged my shoulders. "—Even then, that's still a passing grade…right?"

I said lowering my voice.

Koutari laughed.

An easygoing, laid-back laugh.

As if laughing at my foolish antics.

A fool.

In reality, that's exactly what I was. This whole time, this man had been leading me around by the nose. This whole time— from start to finish. From beginning to pre-determined end. Every last second.

"W-Why!?" The one to shout was Shito. "Why on earth did you— What reason did you have for killing Utsurigi!?"

"Reason? I see… a reason, huh?"

Koutari seemed to be thinking as he reached into his lab coat.

“Then again, the reason doesn’t really matter, now does it?”

“—What are you—” There was a slight tremor in Shito’s voice. “To kill without reason— to kill without motive is…”

That sort of thing-

It shouldn’t exist.

A senseless killer.

A convictionless killer.

It couldn’t exist.

In which case–

“Then is killing fine so long as you have a reason?”

“…Koutari.”

“Just kidding.”

Koutari wore a thin smile. It was chilling.

The kind of scornful smile one would have for a clueless child.

A patronizing sympathy.

A tender disdain.

That’s the impression I got as Koutari gazed at Shito.

“Isn’t that obvious?”

The hand in his lab coat grasped hold of something.

“That’s right. A murder is no good without a motive— isn’t it!?”

Suddenly, he pulled his hand free from his lab coat— hurling the knives held between his fingers. All three of the flying blades burrowed themselves into the bandages wrapped around my left arm. The impact caused me to topple over. I fell flat on my back. The harsh impact, driving the air out of my lungs. My head collided with the floor a second later.

For a second, all eyes were on me sprawled out on the floor. A second later, all eyes darted back to Koutari.

All in all, two seconds.

And that was enough.

*Thunk*, the sound of the door closing.

When everyone looked back, neither hide nor hair of Koutari Hinayoshi could be found.

He had disappeared. Just like that.

Almost as if-

Almost as if such a character had never existed to begin with.

"—That bastard! Don't fuck with me! Shit! Shit!" Shito took off towards the door in an effort to chase after him. "—I won't let you get away!"

"Give it up, Shito," Still sprawled out on the floor, even I was surprised by how listless I sounded. "There's no point going after him."

"—Huh?" Shito turned to face me, his brows furrowed. "What's that supposed to mean—?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. It's too late to catch him now."

That's right. He was probably far beyond our reach. The confidence he exuded as we worked out the solution was more than enough for me to reach that conclusion. He had some sort of escape route already secured—and a foolproof one at that. One that would allow him to evade not only us, but the police as well. Not that I could have said what kind of route that was.

This is fine.

I never really cared to catch him in the first place. All that mattered was proving Kunagisa's innocence. And that had already been accomplished. This was good enough. What came next was a job for someone else. Not for me.

"Besides— Shito. Doesn't your job lie elsewhere?"

I sat up and began plucking the knives out of bandages one by one. Seeing as I didn't start bleeding, it must not have been too serious an injury–

probably just some superficial cuts. It seems like the bandage had served as some kind of barrier. The cuts didn't even hurt thanks to the pain killers, but I was seriously starting to dread the moment they wore off. Would I ever be able to use my left arm again?

Still— these knives. If I hadn't shielded myself with my arm, they certainly would have pierced my heart. Had he known that I would defend myself? Or had he simply not cared whether he ended up killing me. There was no need to even consider the answer, it was almost certainly the latter.

He had a good reason to kill me after all.

And I had my reasons to let him.

After I was done removing all the knives from it, I took my left arm–

–and pointed it at Professor Shadou Kyouichirou.

"Shito. Your job is to be his assistant, isn't it?" I did my best not to sound too cold, but as expected, my voice was still as emotionless as ever. "If so, then you ought to see it through to the end."

"—Professor."

Shito sounded surprised.

There, was an old man. Dazed– and slumped to the floor. His unblinking eyes fixed on the door Koutari had closed behind him, his mouth hanging open.

Like he would topple at the slightest push.

Like he would crumble at the slightest nudge.

A small, old man.

An aging scholar who lost Utsurigi Gaisuke, who let Kunagisa Tomo slip through his fingers.

Having lost his sole purpose.

Having lost his one and only hope.

This is what's left of someone who's lost everything, huh?

*A Mad Daemon*.

In the truest sense.

“What pure unadulterated nonsense.”

I let out an exaggerated sigh.

I see— this bacteria truly was malignant. Spreading and spreading, with no hope to ever contain it. Professor Kyouichirou had tried to pull the strings of *Cluster*’s very own cracker, Utsurigi Gaisuke, and this was the result— and if a genius like Shadou Kyouichirou couldn’t handle him— what hope did someone as small and insignificant as me have?

“Iichan,”

Something took hold of my right hand.

It was Kunagisa.

The blue-coloured-

Girl I know so well.

“Now that everything’s over and done, wanna go home?”

Over. Done.

What exactly is over, and what on earth had we done?

I didn’t know.

I didn’t know.

There’s only one thing I *did* know.

And that was Kunagisa Tomo.

“Hm? What’s the matter Iichan? You don’t wanna go?”

Just past Kunagisa, I could see Suzunashi. She was in the middle of lighting a cigarette. Our eyes met for just a moment, but she paid me no mind, instead turning her gaze to the sky above.

“…That’s right.”

That’s right.

It was over and done.

There was nothing left to do.

There was nowhere left to be.

There was nothing left behind.

From here on out, I was free to float along.

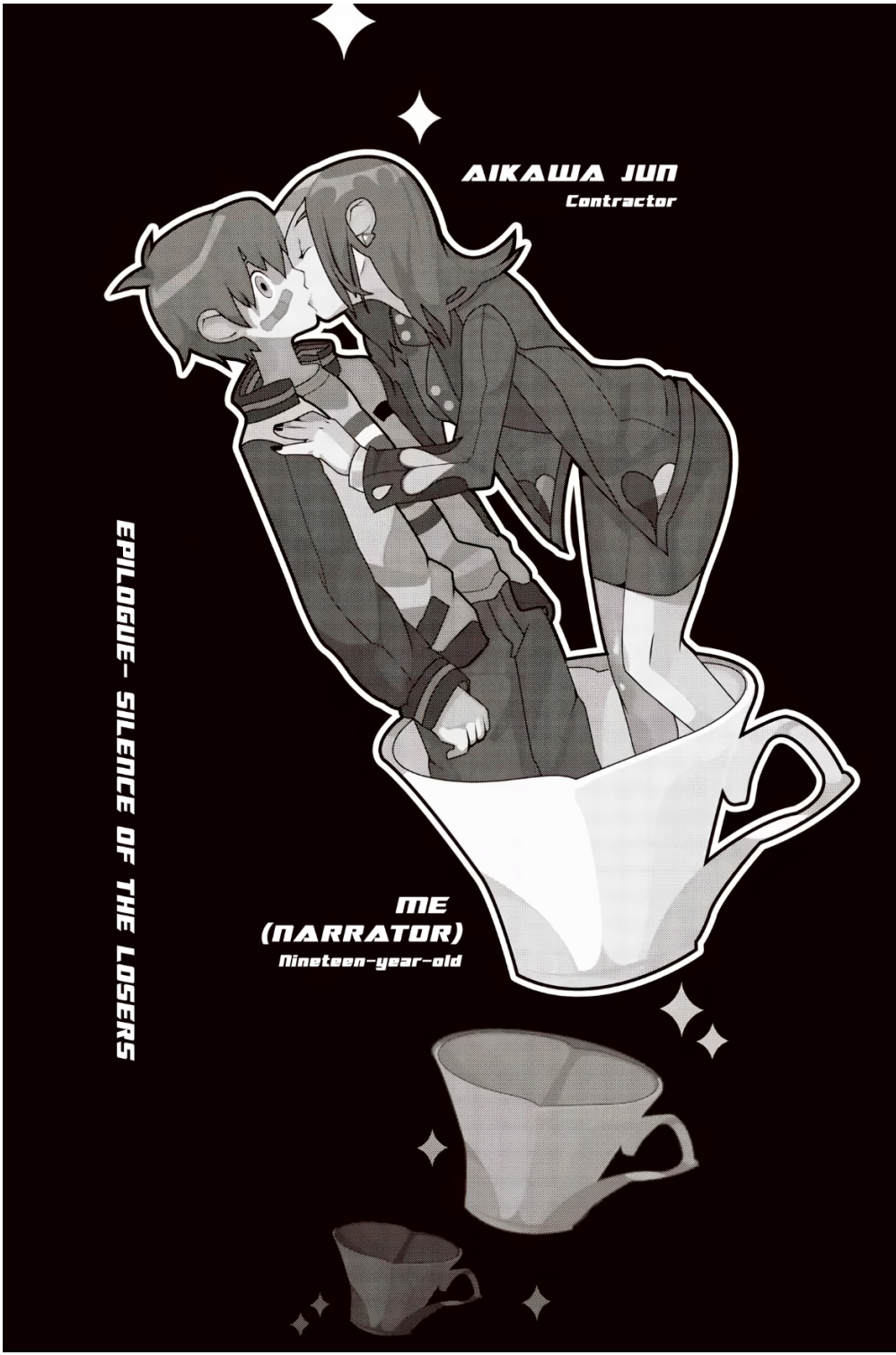
And so,

And so, let's go home.

"Let's go home, Tomo."

But,

Where on earth were we supposed to go home to?




# EPILOGUE- SILENCE OF THE LOSERS

Utsurigi Gaisuke, *"Criminal Judge," Malignant Green*

Hinemosu Suzu, *"Consigned Stillness," Double Flick*

Gotodoroki Seigo, *"Scornful Compatriot," Reverse Cross*

Munefuyu Mutsuki, *"Clamoring Bloodshot," Cubic Loop*

Nadekiri Hakuraku, *"Despondent Momento," Dancing with Madness*

Ayaminami Hyou, *"Spinning Suzuki," Cheetah*

Shikigishi Kishiki, *"Squirming Ruination," Bad Kind*

Shigai Touno, *"Resurrected Abasement," Trigger-happy End*

Kunagisa Tomo, *"Walking Wrath," Dead Blue*

And now for the Epilogue— or rather, a peak behind the curtains that would be best left unspoken.

*Where were we supposed to go home to?* For now, the only place for me to return to was my antique apartment in Kyoto. That night— the night everything had come to a close— without even waiting for it to get dark, we got back in Miiko's Fiat, which we had Shito refuel, and put Shadou Kyouichirou's research facility behind us. While we drove, Suzunashi booked us a hotel room, and we spent a single night in Nagoya. Despite the last-minute booking, the rooms were spacious, and the service was top-notch— Is what I wish I could say, but even then, it was still much better than the facility's *Haunted Manor*. Lined up like sardines in the same bed (Me → Kunagisa → Suzunashi), the three of us slept like corpses. Even though it wasn't exactly true, it still felt as if it had been ages since I last slept.

At daybreak, Suzunashi's lecture began. For the next few hours, I made no rebuttal as I knelt silently in front of her; Suzunashi's relentless scolding was only interrupted by the occasional smack on the head. Before long, Kunagisa woke up and we spent the rest of the day sightseeing around Nagoya. Keeping watch over Kunagisa out of the corner of my eye as she

frolicked like a child, I managed to pick up the uirō-mochi Hime asked me for (luckily, they were selling them in five-colour sets, so it was an instant purchase) as well as some extras for Miiko and the others at the apartment for a total of ten blocks.

That evening, we dropped Suzunashi off back on Hie Mountain in Shiga prefecture.

"Say hi to Miiko for me. We'll finish the rest of your lecture some other time,"

She said. Apparently, she still wasn't through with me. Part of me was apprehensive, but the other part of me was looking forward to it.

Next, we arrived at Kyoto's pride and joy (or perhaps deepest shame), the high-end residential neighborhood, Shirosaki. I parked the car outside Kunagisa's strikingly conspicuous apartment building and walked her to her room.

"Next time, then." "Yeah, next time."

I didn't know exactly what *'next time'* entailed, but nonetheless, I said my goodbyes, got back in the Fiat, and finally headed back to my own apartment. I parked the car in the lot, and from there it was less than a minute's walk. Rather than return to my own room, I knocked on the door to the room right next to it.

"Oh, welcome back." Luckily Miiko was home and she came to greet me wearing one of her usual jinbei. She seemed a little– no, a lot drunk, and her face was glowing slightly. "That was quick. Only spent two nights, huh?"

"Two nights…"

That's right. In fact, the three of us hadn't even spent two whole days at the facility. And yet, despite that, it somehow felt as though we were imprisoned there for over a month.

"Something like that. Thanks for the car. Here's your keys back. And some money for gas… and some uirō-mochi as a souvenir."

"Thanks…hm?" Miiko noticed my left arm. Miss Kokoromi had taken another look at it, so it wasn't bandaged anymore, instead sporting a full-on cast. "…Inoji, you drove all the way back from Nagoya like that?"

"Huh? No, look, I can still move my fingers just fine. And besides,

you can operate the gearshift with your right hand anyways."

"I see… I guess that's fine then."

That's where the questions stopped. She never asked how I got hurt.

"Come on in. Let's eat some uirō-mochi together. These kinds of things always taste better when you share them with someone else."

"Normally, I wouldn't take you up on that, but…"

But after being shown genuine human warmth for the first time in a long while, even I had trouble turning her down.

"I'll let you spoil me today, Miiko."

"Good. C'mon then, don't be a stranger."

And that's how I ended up in Miiko's room being treated to uirō-mochi and tea— although dealing with a plastered Miiko was an ordeal of its own. After that, I returned to my own room. It was empty.

"…Huh?"

Hang on, the lack of furniture may have been normal, but the lack of clothing and books certainly wasn't. My cellphone and charger were missing. Oh man, so were my health insurance card and bank book. I was worried I'd been robbed for a second, but the truth hit me a second later, and I made my way towards Hime's room on the first floor.

"But you said I could have everything, master."

The culprit was Hime.

"I cleaned your room. I even took out the garbage for you."

The *'garbage'* in question no doubt included my personal belongings.

"…Hime. You were only supposed to do that if I didn't make it back okay…"

"Really? But- but, master, just look at your arm– you don't seem very okay to me."

"…I guess not."

Man… if only all cases were this easy to solve.

I only managed to recover my bank book and health insurance card by trading them for the uirō-mochi before I returned to my room once more.

"Ah—…how should I put it?"

It was like waking up from nothingness. Like waking up from a nightmare. Of course, that was nothing more than a fantasy bordering on delusion. After all, *The Mad Daemon*, Shadou Kyouichirou's research facility had been undeniably real.

"Real, huh? —but how is that any different from illusion?"

What would happen to that lab now? I thought about it for quite some time. With the facility's head, Professor Shadou Kyouichirou, in such a sorry state, they wouldn't be able to continue to function as a laboratory; as such, they would likely be absorbed by a nearby research institute, or so Kunagisa said. Indeed, with *The Mad Daemon* becoming worthless— in the literal sense — I can't imagine the Kunagisa House being willing to continue pouring money into him forever. If that happened, what would become of the other researchers?

It probably wouldn't be much of a problem for Neo. That man was a scoundrel from the very start. He'd made betrayal his job— a rogue who ultimately belonged nowhere. He would likely just chalk it up as a loss, compensate his client for duties unfulfilled, and as the professional lowlife that he is, begin searching for his next *job*.

"—I gotta say, I wouldn't be against teaming up again some time. If anything, I'm half-tempted to scout you and bring you back with me."

"That's not funny… Don't go around telling people they've got *the makings of a backstabber*."

"Don't be silly, you don't strike me as a backstabber at all. If anything, you're the type to look someone in the eyes as they betray them."

"……"

"Hm? That one actually *was* supposed to be funny."

—Though I'll likely never have anything to do with the man again, looking back on it now, I can't help finding him a strangely amusing character. It's rare to find anyone so straightforward about their *betrayal*.

Miyoshi Kokoromi— Miss Kokoromi, said something about returning to the ER3 System. There's no reason they would turn down someone as talented as her, so everything would likely work out just fine.

"This is goodbye forever then, Miss."

"Y'think? I reckon we'll be meeting again soon."

"……"

"What's more, next time things'll be far, far worse. Nothin' would suit you better— Frankly, it ain't even funny. Well then, bye-byee."

Once again, Miss Kokoromi left me with a dreadful premonition. Man, why did she have to be so terrible at goodbyes? Cut me some slack already.

Kasugai Kasuga. Kasugai will– well, she'll probably do just about anything. She'd make it work somehow, so there was likely no need for me to worry. In the most literal sense, she would do anything. Of all people, I could never imagine her in a hopeless situation. She never had any convictions to speak of— a person composed of nothing but *talent*. Without goals, nothing is off limits. Without desires, nothing is unnecessary. Without satisfaction, there is no disappointment. Without happiness, there is no sadness. Without something to protect, there is no urge to destroy. If you're not alive, you can't die. To have value, but not values. There is no solution to something that isn't a problem— That's the kind of person she was.

If I had to guess, she will likely get swept up by some branch of the Kunagisa Syndicate. She was far too talented to be left to her own devices. I would likely never meet her again, but— No. When it came to her, there were no *'but'*s.

Ougaki Shito— Uze Misachi. Apparently the two of them planned to go wherever the professor went. They would follow him now and forever. I have nothing to say to that. It isn't my place. Those with strong convictions had nothing to be gained from listening to those with no conviction at all.

And then.

Koutari Hinayoshi.

Koutari Hinayoshi— escaped.

Not even the security guards at the mountain-pass gate caught sight of

him. Just like a puff of smoke, he had vanished into thin air.

"Vanished?— people can't just vanish…"

But people can be made to disappear.

That's all there was to it.

"…Wait, I'm forgetting someone."

That's right, there was someone else. Someone I mustn't forget. Someone I must never forget…

With those thoughts in mind, I drifted off to sleep.

The next day arrived. As easy as it is to forget, I *am* a university student, and as such, I had to be on campus on weekdays. To tell the truth, I would have liked to spend another day recuperating, but thanks to this little trip of ours, I had already missed three days of class, and that's not even counting all the days I missed last month while in the hospital. I had already missed too much, and exams were right around the corner, so regardless of how beat up my body was, I had no choice but to drag myself to class. I got ready to leave (I couldn't use my left arm, so I had to get Miiko to help me dress) then stepped out of my apartment. Houko, the little girl who lived on the floor above me, was crouched in the alley doing something. The straw hat she wore to protect her from the early-morning sun looked oddly fitting on her and made for a cute scene.

"Yo, good morning, Houko"

"Good morning, big brother." Without looking up at me, she quickly bowed her head. "Are you going to school?"

"Yeah. What are you doing, Houko?"

"Killing bugs."

"…I see. Do your best then."

"Yup, I will."

As I walked past her, she reached out and grabbed the hem of my pantleg without looking up.

"Big brother, if you go to school today, you'll probably die."

She said casually.

"I know," I replied casually.

"You know and you're still going?"

"It's a worthless life anyway," I shrugged. "Besides, I have exams coming up."

"Okay then," Houko let go. Houko still didn't look up at me, but I gave her a small wave and continued on my way to school.

Class was as boring as ever. Whether something is boring or not has more to do with the person feeling bored than anything, so I had no right to complain. That's just how university is. And whether it's exam season or not, whether I attend class or not, that will never change. And so, I spent the boring (through no fault of its own) lecture reading a book I borrowed from Nanananami, *The Yacht of Death*. Both the cover and prose were ridiculously antiquated, so it was somewhat difficult to read. It was a boxed hardcover and was so bulky that even when I put it in my bag, it stuck out a little. I just can't wrap my head around Nanananami's tastes. That said, if we're just talking about the book's contents, I personally found them quite interesting and enjoyable.

After lunch break, I had a review seminar. For lunch itself, I bought some sweet bread and took the stairs to my classroom on the fourth floor. This was the kind of situation where you'd usually take an elevator, but for some reason I wasn't in the elevator kind of mood.

"…an elevator kind of mood? What would that even be?"

Speaking of— Utsurigi despised elevators. I suppose it doesn't matter, but I can't help wondering what his reasons were.

Was it because they made him feel trapped…?

I was still considering the answer when I arrived at the classroom where I was greeted with a rather odd sight. A number of my classmates were huddled around the door as if trying to peer into the room. They were free to enter and take a seat, but for some reason all of them wore serious expressions as they tried to catch a glimpse through the crack of the door.

"…What's everyone doing?"

"Oh, Ikkun." Yoshige (wears coats even in the summer. Hobby: bead

collecting) turned to face me. “Long time no see. Ah, did you get hurt again?”

“Hm? You’re right, it really is Ikkun.” Minayama (wears a jersey and high heels. Personal Scripture: Dogra Magra) also noticed me and waved me over. “C’mere a sec. Don’t just stand there, come take a look.”

“Look at what? Just hurry up and go insi—”

“No way!” Yoshimasa (combs back his blonde hair. Wears shorts. Dream job: Astronaut) panicked, swatting away my hand as I reached for the doorknob. “What’re you doing? Don’t throw away this precious gift.”

“Gift?”

“Y’see, right now there’s this strange woman in the classroom,” Märchen (keeps a hamster on her right shoulder. Gothic Lolita) explained, “so how should I put it? —Going inside’s a little awkward.”

“A strange woman? And she’s not one of our classmates?”

“That’s right! But she’s sooo cool!” “Yeah! She’s amazing!” “A complete bombshell!” “She’s so tall— and her hair is gorgeous—!” “Look how long her legs are—” “She seems kinda wild—” “She looks crazy strong!” “I bet she just does whatever she wants, don’t you think!?” “ —red—” “She’s got this unapproachable aura or something—” “She’s, like, super imposing, or, like, heroic or something—”

“Hang on.”

I stopped them.

“Did someone just say *red*?”

“Yeah, I did? Why?”

“—I think I’ve got an idea who it is. Can everyone step aside, I’m coming through.”

Instantly, everyone’s eyes sparkled. Then, as if this is the moment they’d all been waiting for, they happily cried out in unison,

“That’s our, Ikkun! He’s got way more guts than we do! He’s my idol! I want to be him!”

I hate them.

I ignored them and opened the door.

There, as promised–

"—Yo,"

–in an excessively arrogant manner, with her legs kicked up on one of the desks, sat Humanity's Strongest Contractor, Aikawa Jun. As usual, she was dressed in a maddeningly crimson suit with her entire being radiating an intimidating aura. Her mere presence, already a work of art.

"What are the chances I'd meet you here, Iitan?"

"—If this counts as chance, then no one would ever need dice…"

"Ha-ha, true that," Aikawa laughed cynically. Then, without shifting her posture, she leapt out of her chair, over the desk, and landed directly in front of me. "That's right, Iitan, I came here to see you."

"Right… that's fine and all, but please refrain from jumping from a seated position."

"No need to be so tense- not after all we've been through," she said, slinging her arm around my shoulder in an overly-friendly manner. Face to face, cheek to cheek, she brought me unnaturally close. Then, she turned towards my classmates and said, "Now then, all you extras. I'm gonna snatch this bride-to-be for a sec."

"By all means,"

They all said in perfect unison.

I hate them so much.

The powerless nineteen-year-old bride let himself be dragged out of the classroom. Aikawa never removed her arm from around my shoulders, instead she locked it even tighter, pressing our bodies together. You could almost call it an embrace. I wondered how the two of us looked to those around us.

Definitely not like lovers.

…even though I came to that conclusion myself, I found the speed at which I arrived there a little disappointing.

"Hmm? What's the matter, Iitan? You're even quieter than usual?

You depressed or something?"

"No… and more importantly, can you let go of me, it's way too hot."

"What's with you? How cruel—" Aikawa replied in a playful tone. "If you keep talkin' like that, you'll hurt big sis' feelings— You're so cold, Iitan– You're a cold-blooded monster. A real meanie–"

"It's hot. It's summer. And it's hard to walk."

"Just admit you're embarrassed. You're such a boy," Aikawa snickered, finally letting go of me. "Well, I can't pretend like that part of you ain't cute. There's plenty of freaks out there who go wild for that sort of thing. So? How've ya been?"

"…What do you want? Why'd you come all the way to my university? Don't tell me you're here just to kill time."

"Hmm– It's more like I put in the effort to make time. I just finished a job, y'see."

"Is that right? A job, huh?"

"You really are cold, arent'cha, Iitan?" Aikawa said with a wry smile. "Alright, I get it, I get it… if I want you to be honest, I gotta do the same. I admit it, I came here to see you."

"Yeah, obviously. You already said as much."

We left the school building. It was still technically lunch break, so the campus grounds were packed with people still milling about. Aikawa and I carefully threaded our way through the crowd. Judging by Aikawa's deliberate stride, it seems like she had a destination in mind. Even though I felt a touch of unease about where she was leading me, I followed behind her.

"Y'see, I figured maybe I ought to try and patch things up between us,"

Aikawa said. I was so utterly shocked by Aikawa's genuine humility that I was left momentarily speechless. However, that was quickly followed by a happiness akin to walking on air— and yet, it still felt like something was missing.

That's right. Something's wrong. That's not how this goes. Our Aikawa Jun is a little more—

"So, I'm gonna make you apologize."

Aikawa continued with no trace of hesitation. YES! I balled my right fist and did a fist pump. That's the stuff. That's exactly what I'm looking for. Now *that's* Aikawa Jun.

"Sure— no problem whatsoever, Ishimaru Kouta." I nodded. "That whole mess was my fault to begin with, so I apologize."

Aikawa pursed her lips slightly before responding, "Alright. You're forgiven. Frankly, I ought to sock you one for all that, but since I'm trying to make amends here, I'll be the bigger person."

Oh? Grandstanding over not hitting someone?

I knew it. This kind of Aikawa is the best.

"I wouldn't mind. I don't want to fight with Aikawa ei–"

"It's Jun." Even at times like this, she was still as unforgiving as ever. "How many times have I told you not to call me by my last name? Get it through your thick skull already."

"—I don't want to fight with Jun either…" I could not be more serious about that. "…So, does that mean the braids were a wig or something?"

"Yep. All a part of the disguise. Same with the hat and glasses. It's all laughably cliché, really," Aikawa replied, running a hand through her actual hair. "Still, it sure took you long enough. I thought you knew all about my love of disguises. Honestly, I was starting to think you never picked up on it at all, but I guess I wasn't giving you enough credit."

"I guess not… it didn't occur to me at the time, but if anyone could pull of such a perfect Lupin the Third impression, it'd have to be you, wouldn't it?"

"Ha-ha, maybe so. Still, I don't remember dropping any hints this time. What gave it away?"

"No, there were plenty of hints… Like when you used vocal mimicry to trick the security system and break us out of the Seventh Ward… *"Kouta"* made it sound like child's play, but in actuality it was no small feat. This was a defense system built by Kunagisa Tomo after all, so there's no way any run-of-the-mill vocal trickery would have cut it. You also gave me the lockpicking

knife. That was strange too. How would *"Kouta"* have been able to get past any of the locked doors without it? That said, if she had the lockpicking and vocal mimicry skills of Humanity's Strongest, then I'm sure she would have found a way somehow. That sort of thing…"

"So, you brute-forced it using the same strained reasoning as Shadou Kyouichirou?"

I shrugged my shoulders at Aikawa's needling.

"Still, you've got a point. **Anybody could change their voice enough to trick the people around them**– but changing your voiceprint? I might be the only one capable of pulling that off. I get where you're comin' from. Still, given the situation there was no way around it."

"You also told me that no one would ever think to use *"Zerozaki"* as an alias."

"I did? I don't remember saying that."

"Really now? Still, that's all just hindsight… What really made me realize, or rather, the first moment I remember doubting *Kouta* came right at the end. When *Kouta* gave me the lockpicking knife, she said something about me *not being content with just the knife in my right-breast pocket*."

"Hmm, I did, didn't I?"

"Except, at that moment, I was concealing the knife in my left-breast pocket," I said. "I thought it would be easier to wield that way, so I switched it around earlier that very morning. And yet, *"Kouta"* said it was in my *right* pocket. If she had simply spotted the knife in my left pocket, then I could chalk that up to keen perception— but for her to claim the knife was in my right pocket, she would have to have **prior information**. And the only other person in possession of that prior information was none other than the person who gave me the knife in the first place, Jun."

"—damn."

Aikawa slapped her own forehead.

"Ah—… I see. What a stupid mistake."

"I didn't know you were capable of making mistakes. I was starting to wonder whether you said that on purpose."

"Man, guess I let my guard down. Nah, that's not it. Maybe I was just too pissed off at you." Jun wore a cynical smile. "I'm still in need of training, it seems."

"Training? That's Ishikawa Goemon's line, isn't it—? Still, that was awfully mean of you, Jun. Why didn't you just tell me? If I knew Ishimaru Kouta was actually Aikawa Jun, then it would have been much easier to trust her—"

"Trust, eh? Don't give me that— I was on the job, you know. You're not exactly tight lipped. And more importantly, it was fun to see your reactions."

"That's why you did it?"

"When I first called out to you, it was just so I could see you squirm a little. But then you had to go and get yourself captured the very next day. I couldn't just leave you there to rot, could I?"

She spoke as if it were the obvious course of action.

"Then I figured, since I'm already going out of my way to help you, I might as well tease you a little more by keeping up the disguise—"

…She made that, too, sound like the obvious choice.

"Except, then you started goin' on about how you didn't need my help– As a contractor, I can't just go around helping people who insist they can do it all themselves, so I wasn't sure what to do– …Nah, that's not quite right." Aikawa shrugged. "I'll just come out and say it– I was a little touched by your words back then. I'm talkin' 'bout the *'I'm glad I was able to become their friend,'* part. I felt like I'd already missed my chance to come clean."

Oh.

Ahh— all the way back then? Now that she mentions it, I did say that, didn't I? How was I to know I was saying it right in front of the person in question? I'd only spoken my mind because I was certain I'd *never* see *"Kouta"* again.

"I've been glad we were friends for ages," Aikawa teased, grinning. "I love ya, Iitan."

"……"

Guah. How embarrassing. I'd made a complete fool of myself. I've really done it now. Let's- let's quickly change topics. How do I get out of this?

"A-anyway, why the false identity? That doesn't seem like you at all. Even if Zerozaki Itoshiki was just a bad joke, what was Ishimaru Kouta all about?"

"The explanation's a bit tricky… Like I already told you, I was on a job, so my hands were tied. There's confidentiality to consider, so I can't tell you everything— but I was contracted to pull a heist. Y'see, Ishimaru Kouta's a real person."

"Really? Then you were just taking over the job for her?"

"Exactly. Kouta and I are something like uneasy acquaintances. She may talk all fancy, but she's a real piece of work. She's closer to the Fiend with Twenty Faces than Lupin the Third. The real Kouta might've still asked for your help, but she never would have returned the favour. Honestly, working for her is a pain in the ass, so I was planning on turning her down, but then I found out you and Kunagisa were gonna be in the same place. I really only took the job because I was worried about you two."

This woman always lets her feelings interfere with her work.

"But why did Kouta— the real one— not just do the job herself? Why ask you?"

"Right, the thing about Kouta is that she can't stand Neo."

So, she let personal feelings interfere with work too.

"I'm actually quite a fan. He's a complete scumbag, but somehow, he's hard to hate. A real scamp, I think they're called— Ha-ha, you're a bit of a scamp yourself, aren'tcha, Iitan?"

"Please don't lump me together with someone like him… And hang on, Neo and the real Kouta are acquaintances, aren't they? Are you telling me he never noticed you weren't her?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you. Even if you ignore my top-notch disguise skills, it's not like people ever really pay much attention to one another. It's the same kind of deal as you not realizing it was me either. Ah, then again, Kunagisa probably noticed."

"Probably."

That's right. Given Kunagisa's perception and memory, it wouldn't put it past her. However, whether she would have told anyone was a different matter altogether. Perhaps that was the reason Kunagisa looked so spaced out when Kouta appeared before us in the cage in the Fourth Ward's basement. Since I never asked her— since I had no desire to ask her, I could never say for sure.

"Exactly. You could even say that I was Tuxedo Mask this time around."

It seems Humanity's Strongest Contractor had a soft spot for shoujo manga as well.

"So— he really just never noticed? I mean, it's not like you changed your height or anything… or did you?"

"It's not like I couldn't have. There's just no reason to bother. Once people get stuck in their preconceived notions, you can fool them just about any way you like. —Ahh then again, there's one thing I've gotta admit, the real Kouta doesn't actually wear glasses. That was just a trick to stop you from seein' through me."

"Huh…? All it took was glasses…?"

"Pretty much. You know how they cover the eyes of juvenile suspects with black bars? It's the same idea. It ain't easy to recognize someone with their eyes covered, y'know. I guess what I'm tryna say is: no matter how well you disguise yourself— the only things you can't fake are your **eyes** and your **fingerprints**," Aikawa said. "That's why **gouging out the eyes**, **wearing sunglasses**, or even **growing out your hair** to hide your face before suddenly **shaving it all off** might be good tricks to consider. Same with wearing gloves."

"…huh. I see." I tried to answer as calmly as possible. "That makes a lot of sense."

"It's as obvious as it gets. Still, that's the gist of it. The only reason I pretended to be Kouta was to fool Neo. I did a hell of a job, didn't I? They don't call me Humanity's Strongest Contractor for nothin'."

That's when Aikawa grinned fiercely.

Ahh, damnit. She's just so cool.

I felt genuinely captivated.

"…So, in the end, how did your job turn out?"

"Hm? I told you, didn't I? *'I just finished a job.'* When you hear those words comin' from me, it means the job was a success. Aikawa Jun has never once failed a job."

"Is that right?"

"Of course… and I couldn't have done it without your help, Iitan," Aikawa clapped me on the back. "That's what you were trying to do, right? Thanks to you gathering everyone in one place, I had free run of the facility. I'm especially grateful that you bought me some alone time in the Primary Ward."

"……You're welcome," I nodded casually. "Well, that was sort of… paying you back. It was the least I could do."

"How noble of you."

"I may lie, but I never break a promise."

"Hmph… now *that* sounds like a lie. It's like, *'never judge a book by the cover, unless they're a wanted criminal'*."

"…come on now, that's enough of that… you'll make Mikoko mad."

"Hehehe, her running gag is mine!"

"Isn't that just plagiarism?"

"It sounds like a certain someone doesn't know about the law of conservation of energy. It's like *'trying to move on while being stuck looking back, just do the moonwalk!'"*

She had perfected it.

Then Aikawa stopped, turned to face me, and stuck out her right hand.

"Now then. How 'bout a handshake to prove we've buried the hatchet. Or would you prefer a kiss?"

"Ah, umm" even though I hesitated, like the chicken I am, I ended up choosing the handshake. "Well then, I look forward to our continued

relationship."

"Likewise," playing it up, she smiled seductively. "May it be a long one."

Even after leaving the campus, Aikawa kept walking. Where on earth was she taking me? Judging by her stride, she seemed keen to get there, but would it kill her to at least tell me how long it would take?

"Hm? What's this? This book looks ancient."

Disregarding my feelings, Aikawa cried out almost joyfully when she spotted Nanananami's book peeking out of my bag.

"It's a book I borrowed from a witch. It's apparently a mystery novel."

"Hm, let's have a gander." Without asking, she plucked the book out of my bag, took it out of the box, and began flipping through the pages. She quickly lost interest and slid the book back into the box. "Hmph. Boring. You're better off throwin' it away."

No sooner had she said so than she tore the book in half straight down the middle, box and all, before tossing it onto Nishioji street. Just then, several trucks passed by, and Nanananami's book was gone from this world.

"……"

"It feels good takin' out the trash."

"…Yeah, sure."

The words of Goethe or Dazai were meaningless when faced with Aikawa Jun. Naturally, I levied no complaints against anyone who could rip a hardcover in half as easily as if it were calligraphy paper. Jeez, it wasn't even mine… Oh well, it was just Nanananami's. It was pretty beat-up anyways, so I'll just buy her a new copy. I could probably pick one up at market price for three hundred yen.

"I can't stand mystery novels."

A bombshell confession.

"They constantly spout all this drivel about the sanctity of logic, and yet they all want unexpected solutions. Something about how that's what

makes a tantalizing mystery. Anyone with a brain knows the only solutions logic leads to are boring as hell, don'tcha agree? Now if they could manage to make one plus one equal three, then maybe they'd be worth my time."

"Really…? Then what genre of books *do* you like?"

"A fine question. Something you gotta learn about me, Iitan, is that I hate when authors try to be overly clever or catch you off guard. I like hackneyed, cliché stories, like the ones where a man gives his life for a woman. Tried-and-true stories with predictable twists, protagonists you've seen before, and a villain that everyone knows. Stories with a worn-out moral about how good triumphs over evil, about hot-blooded idiots and cunning fools. Stories about the friendship between rivals that have a tear-jerking happy ending. I absolutely love that kinda thing."

"…I see. Tried-and-true, huh?"

"Exactly. Who the hell needs unexpected twists or surprises? Cheap tricks are more than fine by me… Only the royal road befits a king, after all. Going off the beaten path is a job for the court jester, don't you agree? Hm?"

"…I have no words."

"That so?" Aikawa nodded contentedly.

"Speaking of tried-and-true— don't you think the story of Shadou Kyouichirou's research facility and the case on Wet Crow's Feather Island have a lot in common?"

"A lot in common…?"

A gathering of geniuses. An isolated setting. A locked room murder involving someone under lock and key, and the body parts stolen from the scene of the crime, never to be found—

"Yeah. Now that you mention it, they're almost eerily similar."

"Come to think of it, if that incident never happened, the two of us never would've met—"

"What's that about all of a sudden? Don't go off on a heartfelt speech like this is the last time we'll ever see each other."

In response to my dig, Aikawa's lips curled into a smile. "Do you believe some people are fated to meet, Iitan?" she asked. I thought for a

second then shook my head.

"Fate, I can get behind— but I can't bring myself to believe in meetings."

"I see. Typical," Aikawa said. "—still, for as similar as this case was to the one in April, there are a number of notable differences. For one, in terms of major incidents on the island, there were two or three– or was it four? The point is, there were a number of them, but this time you managed to put a stop to it at one. I guess we could chalk that up to you actually putting in a **modicum** of effort for once. That said, the biggest difference would have to be that, of all the geniuses gathered there, each and every one of them was **your enemy**. While they may not have thought very highly of you on that island— you certainly weren't adversaries, but this time you played a splendid *villain*."

"…villain."

"There wasn't a single person on your side– even the victim turned out to be against you. Honestly, that kinda thing's gotta be rare, right? Despite the situations looking **almost identical** at the outset, the outcome couldn't have been more different. Doing the same thing, but getting different results? That logic just doesn't add up. It just goes to show that what's really important ain't plot, but characters. That's right, it's like we took the incident on Wet Crow's Feather Island, turned it over, and flipped it **inside-out**."

"—Then it must have been awfully boring for you. I don't remember much happening on that nonsensical island other than my love story with Akari."

"Oh really? That's really somethin'."

Humanity's Strongest spoke in a carefree manner, yawning as she strolled along. But I wasn't about to let that easy-going attitude fool me.

That's right, don't forget.

The contractor's role in the story.

The reason for her appearance here at the end.

Indeed— if this case truly was the inverse of the case that brought Aikawa and I together— if this truly was **Wet Crow's Feather Island turned inside-out**— then what kind of tried-and-true twists did she have in store.

Tried-and-true.

Predictable.

—predictable, huh?

We passed by some high school students on a field trip, as we crossed Imadegawa street. After going a little further, Aikawa finally stopped and entered a nearby café. The FM radio was blaring. Perhaps it was because of the lunch rush, but the place was packed. Maybe Aikawa would even pay for my meal. If she did, what should I do with the sweet bread I went out of my way to buy? No, like I said, this was no time to be so easy-going.

Aikawa took a seat, gesturing for me to sit across from her. Then, after casually ordering some drinks, she said, "So, Iitan, if I told you I had another reason for coming to see you, what do you think it'd be?"

"—Likely something to do with the case."

"Such a business-like answer. If you were the kinda guy who could say something witty at a time like this, your life would've turned out so much different," Aikawa smiled. "Still, you're not wrong— but before we get into that, let's chat a little longer. We've still got some time,"

Aikawa said without even looking at the clock. This lady's internal clock could give an atomic clock a run for its money, so she had no use for the digital or analogue variety. However, the word *'still'* caught my interest. No — perhaps it's better to say that word triggered an overdue realization. Just like the words *'right-breast pocket'* had led to my realization about Aikawa's disguise.

I understand it now. **So that's how they managed to escape the facility without being caught**. Certainly, with this person's help— nothing was impossible.

If so— then perhaps that was it. Maybe that had been the contractor's job all along. If that were true, then the reason Aikawa never revealed her true identity to me— doesn't it start to make a little more sense?

…I was almost certainly overthinking it, but— but I couldn't shake the illusion. In that case, given what Neo was up to, by the time Humanity's Strongest got involved— the research facility's fate had long since been sealed, hadn't it?

Suspicion clouded my mind, but with seemingly no consideration for my current mental state, Aikawa continued.

“So, what’s been going on between you and Kunagisa since then?”

She asked.

“What’s been going on…? Not much. It’s not like anything’s changed. We had some fun in Nagoya and then I dropped her off at home yesterday. We haven’t seen each other since.”

“I see,” Aikawa nodded. “Well, I suppose that’s to be expected.”

“And why is that?”

“No reason, I was just thinking– rather than hold someone, you’re the kinda guy who prefers to be held, aren’tcha?”

“I don’t get it.”

“That’s because I’m being vague on purpose. It’d be a pain in the ass if you actually understood. Regardless, I’ve gotta say, I’m honestly shocked by your loyalty to Kunagisa— your fealty. Almost like a mediaeval knight.”

“You’re giving me too much credit.”

“Really now? And here I thought I was being rather objective. That said, your clumsiness really stood out this time.”

“Was it that obvious?”

“It was,” Aikawa laughed.

“I mean– what was all that about? Singling out your culprit using the process of elimination? Were you trying to make me laugh?”

“You were listening?”

“Just at the start. It was so ridiculous I had to give up halfway. I heard the rest after the fact— besides, I was busy using the window your puppetshow bought me to sneak around the Primary Ward. That was more important.”

“……”

After the fact.

But who did she hear it from?

"*The rooftop route*. I gotta say, your naming sense leaves a lot to be desired—" Aikawa said. "You can't use it because you're a woman. You can't use it because you're fat. You can't use it because you're old. You can't use it because you have bad eyesight— give me a break. You don't seriously believe any of those reasons are good enough, do you?"

"You don't?" I played dumb. "I don't see why not."

"Sure, the risk would be high, but that's all the more reason to go through with it. Looking at it the other way, if you manage to pull it off despite the risk, then you can escape suspicion. —I mean, speaking frankly," Aikawa pointed at herself with her thumb. "If it were me— Aikawa Jun. Even as a woman, even if I were a hundred-year-old granny, I could leap ten metres with my eyes closed and a two-hundred-and-fifty-kilogram dumbbell on my back— I wouldn't even need a running start."

"Well yeah, but you're… an exception. You could probably run across walls."

"I can run across ceilings, kid. So, if you know about outliers like me, why would your reasoning be so ordinary? Don't tell me you forget how that turned out last month."

"Last month…huh. You may have a point, but it's not like any of them denied it and said they could've jumped it, right?"

"Like hell they would. That's the same as begging to be put back on the list of suspects. In that sense, I've gotta give you props. That was a clever way to make the most out of the **process** of elimination. Anyone would be defensive if you suddenly insisted *they were the culprit* but there's not a person alive who'd get defensive about being declared *innocent*. There's no need to refute an argument that's to your benefit after all."

The process of elimination.

Looking at it from a psychological perspective— there was hardly be a more absurd technique. However, there are certain situations where absurdity makes for quite the weapon— and I've seen more than my fair share.

"—Still, you can't deny that it *is* a difficult jump. It's too far. If it weren't for the situation I was in, I never would have considered jumping either."

"If you're gonna say that— then **using the same logic as the process**

**of elimination**, couldn't we question whether Koutari could have pulled it off too? It'd be one thing if he was a body-builder or something, but we're talking about a middle-aged science geek. Do you still think he could have made that jump?"

"Who knows?"

I continued to play dumb. There was no real point to it, it's just, having Aikawa back me into a corner like this was fun in its own right. Perhaps that pleasure was a little bit masochistic.

"Besides, if that's not what happened, how do you explain everything else? Since it's the only possible solution, we can't just rule it out."

"Hmph, I see. So that's how you're gonna be, Iitan. How cute– makes me want to pinch your cheeks." In direct contrast, Aikawa's broad grin was completely sadistic. "Then tell me… That whole story about how Koutari got back– how he used his hair to make a rope– how he used Utsurigi's arms to make a hook and escape the Seventh ward— Do you really believe it?"

"Really really, and one more really for good measure."

"Swear to god?"

"Swear to god."

"Swear to Chiga Hikari?"

"That, I can't do."

"—You're so friggin' cute, you know that…?" Aikawa laughed in disbelief. "Well either way… suppose you're right and you could suspend a rope between the Sixth and Seventh Wards,"

Aikawa continued,

"—**what then**?"

"……"

"This isn't about whether it could hold your weight. That part's fine. But, what would you do next? You made a rope, and using momentum and centrifugal force, you're able to launch the rope across so it spans the gap between the buildings. That part's already batshit enough— but your next move would be… what exactly? Tightrope walking?"

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"You think scientists are that fit? And without a balance pole? Not even circus troupes have the guts to try that nowadays. Even if you took all the girls from that academy, Saijou Tamamo's probably the only one who could've managed it. It's not the sort of thing you can pull off with any ordinary sense of balance- much less when your life is on the line."

"Who's to say he couldn't? Sure, the chances are slim, but they aren't exactly zero either. You never know what people are capable of when their lives are at stake."

"Ain't that the exact opposite of what you were saying earlier, Mister *Opportunist*?" Aikawa laughed. "Then you won't mind if I do the same— right? If you're betting something as precious as your life, why on earth would you make such a risky gamble?"

"……"

"If they were prepared to go through something as stupid as tightrope walking, then they would've had a better shot at surviving if they just jumped down."

"Come on now. That's just nitpicking." I tried deflecting like a mystery writer. "Whatever the final deduction is, it must be the truth. Besides, Utsurigi admitted to all of it—"

"He admitted it? Ha!" Aikawa forced a laugh.

"What was it again? The hand print on his arm—? That was your proof, right? Except, Utsurigi **never actually showed us any hand prints**, did he?"

"He must've given up."

"He gave up— laughable," Aikawa really did laugh. "Fine then, that's enough. We've done more than enough talking, Iitan, so get over here."

"What for?"

"I'm gonna punch you."

You'd have to be an idiot to hear that sort of thing and willingly get closer. Rooted to the spot, I responded by simply spreading raising arms slightly. Seeing that, Aikawa said, "alright, alright, I won't punch you, so

come here.”

Relieved to hear that, I made my way over.

She kissed me.

“……

“Hm? What’s that look for? It’s not like that was your first kiss, was it?”

“…well, no, but…”

I shrugged my shoulders again, trying to look unbothered. With a completely unfazed attitude, I slicked my hair back, lightly crossed my legs, took a sip of the coffee that had been placed in front of me, and spread my arms wide.

……It actually was.

“Anyway, here’s what I really wanted to say, Nonsense User. If you’re gonna put on a farce, at least come up with a more convincing lie.”

“……”

A farce— that’s right. What Professor Kyouichirou had called a *‘typical con-artist’s tactic’*. Supplanting truth with amazement. In doing so, the latter half of my reasoning could be omitted. Purposefully spitting out vague half-finished answers that could be interpreted in any number of ways. Cementing confusion as truth.

There was no need for a correct solution.

It just needed to be unexpected.

That’s right, I never needed to uncover the truth.

I just needed to surprise them.

Entirely *psychological*.

Nothing to do with the act itself, but the logic of perception.

“Can you really blame me—?” I looked away evasively. Naturally, there was no escaping Aikawa’s gaze. It pierced right through me. “I ran out of time. I didn’t have a chance to iron out all the details. I only realized the

**truth of the matter** at the very last second. Besides, it's only natural that my reasoning had some holes in it given all the painkillers Miss Kokoromi put me on, isn't it?"

And above all else, the biggest limiting factor was that I needed to manufacture an element of surprise. For instance, if my grand conclusion was something like *there was a ladder hidden in one of the wards* or *they used a helicopter*, no one would have bought it. If it didn't shock and amaze, it was out of the question.

"Don't make excuses, idiot."

Wow, harsh.

"Still— **with the detective, culprit, and victim all in cahoots**, you could've gotten a confession no matter what theory you came up with. Surely you could've settled on something more elegant."

"But Koutari himself gave me sixty points. That's a passing grade."

"He was being generous. I would've given you a one."

"That's awfully strict."

That said, I can't deny the conditions were in my favour. The one playing the role of the culprit had a solution prepared for me from the start— All that I had to do was decide how to spin it.

That's not all, I had been blessed with an exceptional cast as well. The folks at that facility— the so-called scholarly researchers. They were used to wonders being wonders. To them, the secretive nature of this world was self-evident. With a gallery like that, orchestrating a puppetshow was remarkably easy.

All I had to do was take advantage of their blind spots— the things they unconsciously avoid, the things they don't consider worth thinking about, the things once thought preposterous. Since the key culprit was actually an accomplice, the race was rigged from the start.

Besides— taking advantage of blind spots was a nonsense user's specialty.

A makeshift bluff, a counterfeit philosophy.

So long as the goal was to bewilder, I was unmatched. The smarter

they were, the sweeter the nonsense sounded.

"Well, since the test only had one question to begin with, one point may not be so bad."

"For me, the hard part was realizing everything in the **opposite order**. Speaking of… when did you figure out the truth, Jun?"

"Don't ask. It's cooler to leave that kind of thing unsaid," Aikawa struck a suitably cool pose. "Besides, the answer would just bum you out."

"……"

"……well, looks like it's about time. So, Iitan," Aikawa knocked back her glass of water then paused for a moment. Then she reached into her pocket, pulled out a pair of red sunglasses, and put them on. "This might be my last opportunity, so I'm just gonna go ahead and ask. Tell me, Iitan. Did you really never doubt Kunagisa? Not even once? Not even a little?"

A question posed as an afterthought.

For a second, I was at a loss for words.

"Kunagisa would barely have to lift a finger to bypass the lock on the Seventh Ward. She acknowledged that herself. I don't think the professor was merely trying to pin it on her. I think he truly believed it to a certain extent. After all, it's the only rational solution. …Actually, you know what? Forget all that. Whether the crime was possible or not, whether she had a motive or not– put all that **boring shit** aside, Iitan. Were you really convinced that Kunagisa Tomo *wouldn't* kill Utsurigi Gaisuke?"

"……"

Discarded or not, he was still hers.

She found it unpleasant having someone pick up after her.

"—I-"

"You don't need to answer. I just wanted to ask." Just as I was about to say something, Aikawa placed a finger to her lips. "You worked hard this time. So, keep it up just a little bit longer. I'm happy that I get to be friends with such a stellar guy,"

Aikawa said, taking the cheque in hand before excusing herself from

the table. The sight was incredibly dashing, unbelievably bold, exceptionally cool, and splendidly red. She was so dazzling it was hard for someone like me to look straight at her. No, I'm sure someone like me could never truly see her at all.

And yet, despite that, my eyes stayed fixed on that blinding crimson, and I opened my mouth.

"Aikawa. If we meet again…"

"Yeah? What is it?"

"Would you hold me?"

A voice that feigned calm.

I knew it was just an act.

I knew it wasn't a very good one.

Aikawa looked a little taken aback, wearing an uncharacteristically childlike and bewildered expression, but the very next instant I was treated to her usual wicked, nihilistic grin as she stuck out her flaming-red tongue.

"You're a million years too early, virgin!"

She flipped me off.

"Now then, the next time a suitably consummate occasion arises let us meet again, *dear friend*."

Her final remarks were delivered in Kouta's voice, then without even waiting for my reply, Aikawa turned her back and made her way out of the café. Leaving me alone at our table-for-two. For a while, I didn't think of anything. I didn't want to. But— it doesn't work that way. I'm always forced to think of something. Once I notice it, there's no escape.

In the end— who was her employer?

Ishimaru Kouta?

Neo Furuara?

Utsurigi Gaisuke?

Or perhaps— Koutari Hinayoshi?

"…Still, next time, huh?"

For me-

The question of whether there'd even be a next time was a delicate one. That said, if it meant being able to stay Aikawa Jun's friend, maybe putting in the effort to make sure there was wouldn't be so bad. It might even be worth living another million years.

I thought.

I pondered.

*"'Never judge a book by its cover'*— I suppose you're right, Aikawa."

I thought as I sipped the coffee in front of me. When it came to whether Kunagisa could've been the culprit or not, I could confidently declare she was innocent. Kunagisa has a strange condition where she can't make any vertical movements on her own— I suppose it's more accurate to call it a compulsive disorder. In other words, whether it be the stairs or the elevator, all such modes of traversal were off limits for her. It wasn't only logically impossible, but physically impossible as well.

However,

If we leave logical and physical reasoning by the wayside and narrow it down to the single question of whether or not Kunagisa *would* have killed Utsurigi, then–

Kunagisa probably wouldn't have.

But the same couldn't be said for *Dead Blue*.

I thought.

"——Nonsense."

That's right, such words were clearly nonsense.

However,

Even if the security system was meaningless before Kunagisa. Even if no one else could have bypassed it. All that meant was that Kunagisa was in possession of some kind of *master key*— In which case, even if Kunagisa herself couldn't have committed the crime, if she were to pass that key off to

someone else… just like Kouta— just like Aikawa had passed the *anti-lock blade* off to me, then-

It was possible.

"In the end, it all comes down to what Kunagisa and Utsurigi talked about that day— damnit," I muttered bitterly to myself. "A conversation between two geniuses— I can't even imagine it."

I couldn't even imagine it, but–

What if Kunagisa had **taught him**?

What if?

That would have meant Utsurigi would have had free reign of the facility. Bypassing the security and wiping the logs. He could have roamed about anywhere he pleased.

If you know the ultimate technique— then why bother with any others? Avoiding using it is nothing more than the last bastion of pride for petty cowards.

"……"

Of course, even had Kunagisa taught me that ultimate technique, I couldn't have made use of it. I didn't have the skill to pull it off. But Utsurigi —that menace had the know-how. He possessed the brains to understand— and the arms to carry it out.

It would only be natural for Kunagisa to teach him. *'If you do this, then you can escape.'* She would have spared no detail in her explanation.

But Utsurigi refused. He couldn't accept her offer. He wasn't trapped within the cramped locked-room that was the Seventh Ward— he was trapped in Shadou Kyouichirou's palm.

If he truly wanted to escape— suicide was his only option.

And so, Utsurigi snuffed out his own existence.

"And so, he destroyed Professor Shadou Kyouichirou."

Truly destructive, truly malignant.

Who was the real *Mad Daemon*? That's the kind of story this was. A

story of nothing but destruction. Destruction and nothing else. No salvation, no forgiveness, no damnation, and no murder. Just destruction. Too laughable, too ironic, and all too tasteless. That's the kind of made-up story this was.

In the end— even though it wasn't necessary, even though he knew damn well that Utsurigi would never run away so long as he could use Kunagisa as leverage— The reason Professor Kyouichirou still chose to lock Utsurigi away in the Seventh Ward— the reason he had no choice but to lock Utsurigi away in the Seventh Ward was because-

He was scared of him.

He was terrified of Utsurigi Gaisuke.

Just as he was terrified of Kunagisa Tomo.

"The professor must've known that all along…"

Ah, is that how it was? I finally realized.

The professor realized I escaped the cage not for any of the reasons I anticipated, but simply because he had ratted me out. I see. Because I hadn't solved the case— because I hadn't reached the solution he prepared for me, that was his way of scolding me.

Indeed,

Like in his conversation with Neo, hints were scattered around so blatantly it was almost too obvious—

"And I still never noticed—" I placed the empty coffee cup back down on its saucer. "But how was I supposed to realize something like that? I was supposed to realize, right?"

Don't ask the impossible from me.

Do I really have to put up with these unreasonable demands? Do I really have to obey? Aikawa had given my reasoning a single point— but even that was far too generous. Not even the truth deserves that high a score.

Ahh, Professor Kyouichirou.

In moments like these, I truly understand how you felt.

Meanwhile Kunagisa Tomo.

Utsurigi Gaisuke.

“As for your feelings, I can hardly stand to listen to and accept them, let alone understand them…”

Much less understand everything else.

However, whatever the final deduction is, it must be the truth.

That’s the rule.

The puppetshow rule.

There was no need for understanding. No need for acceptance.

No need for praise. No need for evaluation.

There was no coercion. There was no demand.

Simply obey.

Silent like a lamb, fed like a pig.

“—How’s that for logic, you bastards?”

Make hell the hell named hell.

Massacre the massacre named massacre.

Make sin the sin named sin.

Despair the despair named despair.

Make chaos the chaos named chaos.

Subdue the submission named submission.

Be proud, we, of this beautiful world.

This is the bedroom of the Verge of Death; rampage all you want, as the Verge of Death allows it.

“……Doing whatever you like, dying and coming back to like whenever you please— what are you *Otokojuku*?”

Truth… the truth?

How stupid. How stupid. How stupid.

What is truth? What is real?

Don’t make me laugh.

This is just— a result.

But,

As long as you get results— no one can complain.

“No matter the explanation, no matter the interpretation— it’s all nonsense.”

It’s not that I don’t understand.

I don’t know.

That’s why my explanation was not to explain.

Moving on while looking back.

The last line of defence.

—noticing my empty coffee cup, the waitress hurried over. She offered me a refill, but I turned her down. ‘Alright then,’ she parted with a smile. It was the fake kind of smile reserved for customers, but nonetheless, smiles were a good thing. Maybe the best of things. And no good thing— ever dies.

“—the nonsense ends here.”

—*clack,*

The echo of footsteps.

Among the clamor of the café and the ceaseless din of the FM radio, the footfalls rang clearly.

*Clack—clackclack—clackclackclack—clackclackclackclackclack—clackclackclackclackclackclackclackclackclackclackclackclackclackclackclackclackclackc*
——

The sound made my left arm throb with pain. I thought of the knife still hidden under my jacket and the Jericho still tucked into my belt. Not that

they were ever very reliable, were they?

The footsteps passed me by— and took a seat directly in front of me. Without hesitation, they took the spot where Humanity's Strongest had been sitting mere moments before.

Legs crossed and arms folded in a carefree manner.

Dressed in a stylish outfit. Wearing a white suit that, in all likelihood, bore the name of some famous brand. Gloves. Shoes. Wristwatch. When not wearing a lab coat, this must've been their standard fashion. But all of it seemed to go strangely well with his shaved head, giving him an almost comically intimidating presence.

Although he wore sunglasses just as he had inside the facility, the lenses were neither orange nor black, instead a clear, nearly transparent green.

From behind those green lenses, his eyes sneered gleefully at me. However, just behind those eyes, he wasn't smiling at all.

And then he–

Sat there, not saying anything.

"—Ah, that's right, it was my turn, wasn't it?"

He was surprisingly conscientious.

Despite the situation, I felt somewhat pleased.

Pleased to see which face the die had landed on.

I didn't dislike it, nor did I find it unpleasant.

"The arms were cut off simply to hide the fingerprints, weren't they?"

Silently—

He confirmed my suspicions. As if grinning, he nodded.

It was a truly straightforward solution.

If only— if only every case could be solved so neatly, accepted so readily, and resolved so satisfactorily— wouldn't that be wonderful?

"Come to think of it— you were the only one to call Kunagisa *Dead*

*Blue*— no one else knew her by that name."

Shut up and watch, Kunagisa Tomo.

Kunagisa— likely knew everything from the very start.

That Ishimaru Kouta was really Aikawa Jun.

The truth of the case and the reality behind the scenes.

And this conclusion.

And yet she remained silent.

She shut up and watched.

That's fine, it's not like she did anything wrong.

That was not betrayal.

There is no betrayal where there is no conviction.

There is no betrayal where there is trust.

Even I—

Had learned how to stay quiet.

"Now then—"

If I could have your attention, everyone.

If you could bear with me just a little while longer.

We can't stop just yet— not when we're having such fun.

Let us commence with the beginning of the end.

"You actually hate Kunagisa Tomo, don't you?"

Abruptly, without any preface or preamble, instinctually and inevitably, without a drop of doubt or inkling of indecision, without a hint of hesitation or trace of tact, yet without being particularly forceful or especially

arrogant, as if looking up at, as if gazing down upon, smoothly and slickly, as if it were clear as day, Utsurigi— Utsurigi Gaisuke spoke.

I answered.

“I don’t know.”

《MAD DAEMON & DEAD BLUE》is a Very Very DEAD END.

Afterword—

Let's see. I read it a long, long while ago, but there's a passage in one of Dostoevsky's novels that goes like this: *'I agree that two times two makes four is an excellent thing; but if we are dispensing praise, then two times two makes five is sometimes a most charming little thing as well.'* You might be tempted to butt in and say, "What the hell is this guy saying!? That doesn't even make any sense!" but if you manage to grit your teeth and bare it, you'll find words like these have a way of resonating within your heart beyond any reason or argument. I'd much rather have my personal motto be a contradictory statement like that than some pretentious proverb. Beautiful logic is all well and good, but it would be boring if that's all there was, so I wish more things would boldly exist as that kind of daring contradiction. Take Zeno's paradox for instance— the sheer wonder of the paradox far outweighs the satisfaction of its solution, which, frankly, makes solutions come across as boorish and unrefined. There was a certain mathematician who took a fond liking to the phrase "the margins are too narrow," and somehow, I find myself understanding why. After all, things rarely go to plan in this world, so why not let the unknown remain unknown and not force yourself to come up with an answer? I admit that's rather indulgent, but it should be fine to indulge every once in a while, shouldn't it? Life's too short to break everything down into factors, and even if you come up with a solution, there's no guarantee it will be a satisfying one, so why not forgo the idle reasoning, feel what you feel, and shut up about the rest? After all, if you don't argue, you can't lose the argument. Although, coming from the author of a book like this, I'm sure these words won't amount to anything more than nonsense.

Following *Kubikiri Cycle, Kubishime Romanticist, and Kubitsuri Highschool*— or rather, in this fourth installment that *doesn't* follow the rest, it's hard to say exactly where our protagonist stands. The people around him aren't the graceful sort like in *Kubikiri*, nor are they fine people like in *Kubishime*— they're not even worthy rivals like in *Kubitsuri*. To call him the narrator implies too much insight into the story's inner workings, to call him a tag-along makes him sound too inconsequential, and it's undeniable that the term hero doesn't quite fit. My hope is to distract from that question with this sour little song. An immature protagonist who nonetheless hasn't experienced youth— that's the kind of contradiction born by Psycho Logical (volume 2), Sour Little Song.

To my editor-in-chief, Outa Katsushi and my illustrator, Take, as usual, I extended my deepest gratitude. I would also like to thank all my readers whose reviews have begun trickling in one-by-one. After all, the written word is nothing without those who read it, so I'd like to express my sincere appreciation for all without exception. With that said, 'till next time.

-Nisio Isin